

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

God Breaks His Silence: The Revelation to Zacharias

Scripture: Luke 1:8-17

Code: 42-4

We are studying the gospel of Luke. This is the highlight, really, of our worship as we come before the Lord and He speaks to us through His Word. This is just the beginning of our study of Luke, you can open your Bible to the first chapter of Luke, if you would like to, and follow along as we'll be commenting directly on the text of Scripture.

There are so many things that are foundational and formidable in establishing our understanding of the gospels and of Luke, that I want to address them week by week. The New Testament is the record of the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is what the New Testament is about. It's the story of Jesus. In particular, the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, tell the story of His life from four different perspectives.

One thing is clear in the gospels and that is the presence of miracles. In fact, in the four gospels there are 35 or so miracles detailed for us. Some of them are miracles which involve a single individual, some of them are miracles which involve thousands and thousands of people. But the gospels are filled with miracles. The stories of miracles run through these four accounts. There are about twenty miracles that Luke describes in his gospel.

Now a miracle must be understood. A miracle by definition is an act or event that is entirely supernatural...it is an act or event that is entirely supernatural. It is contrary to natural law. It is explained only by divine intervention. It's very important for you to understand that. A miracle is an act or event that is entirely supernatural. It cannot be explained by natural law or by human reason but only by divine intervention. A miracle is when God halts the normal human processes and intervenes supernaturally.

Let me take it a step further. If there is any possibility of a human explanation, if there is any possibility of a rational explanation, or an empirical or scientific explanation, it is not a miracle. And the reason I say that is because miracles had a purpose...miracles are very rare in the history of the world, even rare in biblical history. Miracles had one purpose. Miracles were to demonstrate that God had intervened into human life to speak and act. That's what miracles were for. Therefore they couldn't have any human explanation and be miracles. A miracle is an event or an act which has no explanation other than that God has intervened to speak or act. There's no way to explain it by natural law. There's no way to explain it by human reason. Miracles are inexplicable by natural law and human thought. Thus, miracles do exactly what they were designed to do, they reveal that God

has intervened. Never did God intervene so potently and powerfully, never did God do so many supernatural acts, never did God do so many miracles as at the time of the arrival of Jesus Christ. The greatest miracle in human history is the miracle of the incarnation...God becoming man, God supernaturally planting a seed in a virgin woman who brought forth a child who was 100 percent man and 100 percent God at the same time...a virgin-born God/Man, the incarnation...that is the greatest miracle of all miracles. And that miracle is the centerpiece miracle surrounded by many other miracles, many of which are described in the gospel records of the New Testament and certainly many which occurred but aren't in the gospels. There were many others. John says so many things were done by Jesus, so many things were said by Jesus that even the books of the world couldn't contain them all.

When you come into the record of the gospels, whether you're reading Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, you begin to come to miracles. You are literally going to be finding yourself in the midst of miracle after miracle after miracle as God is intervening. And God intervened at that time in human history like no other time, like no other time.

Let me just give you the big picture perspective. Miracles, frankly, don't happen in our time/space world...they don't happen. All around the globe, all around the earth history goes on and goes on and goes on and goes on and miracles don't happen. There are some rare exceptions when miracles did happen. They happened, however, not just anywhere and everywhere, but in that narrow band, that narrow realm of redemptive history that involved the nation called Israel. And even in the life of Israel, that one small little middle eastern nation that God has chosen to be His people out of which He literally drew His Messiah, there are some miracles that occurred in the life of that little nation but even those are very, very rare.

For example, as you read the history of the Old Testament, you're going to come to miracles when you come to Israel and Egypt. God miraculously brings plagues upon Egypt that causes them to allow the Israelites to leave and head for the promised land. And then God miraculously parts the Red Sea so they can walk across and then drowns in that same sea all the pursuing armies of Pharaoh. There are miracles that follow in the wilderness, forty years of wandering God provides manna from heaven and God provides water from a rock. There are things that occurred there miraculously, this under the leadership of a man named Moses. In Moses' lifetime, both in Egypt and in the wilderness, he saw the miraculous. And that was a time when God was revealing Himself, God was founding His nation, drawing them out of captivity, taking them to the land, revealing Himself to them as the true and living God. And God attended His revelations with miracles.

There's another period in the Old Testament in which miracles occurred and that is in the prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha, two very special, unique prophets of God. And attending their ministry as they spoke the Word of God were miracles.

But apart from the time of Moses and Israel's coming out of the land and the time of Elijah and Elisha, miracles were not normal. Miracles didn't happen. On some rare occasions God may have done something miraculous as in the case of Daniel, for example. And while Daniel's life is not by any means filled with miracles, and he lived to be a very old man, there were a couple of very remarkable things in Daniel's life. One was the fact that he was in a lion's den and wasn't eaten by the lion. That in itself may be providential rather than miraculous. But later on in the story of Daniel there is the wonderful story of the fiery furnace where the faithful are thrown into the fire and the fire doesn't burn them...that is a miracle. But those are rare occasions. Miracles didn't normally happen. They don't happen in our space/time world. They did happen on rare occasions to that little nation Israel, those who belonged to that little nation Israel, in God's redemptive history at special times when God was revealing His truth to them.

But the last miracle? Well the last time of miracles would have been Elijah and Elisha and that is 800 years before we find ourselves in the gospel of Luke. That's a long time and apart from what happened in the life of Daniel, there haven't been miracles. There hasn't even been the appearance of an angel for at least 500 years. The appearance of a heavenly visitor in the case of Zechariah, the appearance of a heavenly visitor in the fiery furnace in the case of the Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, but that's 500 years ago. And God hasn't spoken in at least 400 years since Malachi wrote.

All of a sudden we come to this time in history identified in verse 5 as the days of Herod the king, which would have been 37 B.C. to 4 B.C., right up until maybe a year after Jesus was born. And now we come into this time period 400 years since the last prophet, 500 years since the last appearance of a heavenly visitor, 500 years at least since the last miraculous act of God in the case of the friends of Daniel and 800 years since any...any long list of miracles occurred in the lives of the two prophets, Elijah and Elisha. But now something dramatic happens. All of a sudden angels start to appear. And all of a sudden God starts to speak and reveal His Word and miracles begin to happen. And they start and they come at a rate never before even imagined in the history of the world...far more miracles than at any other time. This is literally an explosion of the miraculous on this little piece of earth that we know as the land of Israel. And all of that miraculous surrounding the greatest miracle, the virgin birth, is to indicate that God has indeed intervened and invaded history with the supernatural message and a super natural reality, the God/Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is THE most dramatic, THE most important, THE most special, THE most unique event in all of redemptive history and it is attended to with miracles. So we're going to expect as we go through the gospel of Luke to be engaging ourselves in the on-going study of God's miraculous intervention into human history. We're not going to be able to apply scientific laws to all the things that happened. We're not going to be able to find rational explanations for everything that goes on, for all of the amazing things that happen. There is no reasonable or scientific explanation for the incarnation of

God in Jesus. There is no reasonable explanation for the fact that He lived a perfect life, died a substitutionary death on the cross in which He paid the penalty for the sins of all who would ever believe. There is no way reasonably to explain a physical, bodily, literal resurrection from the dead. And no way to explain on the experimental level empirically how one could ascend into heaven without the aid of science or a rocket or anything else as Jesus did in His ascension. And we're going to see miracle after miracle after miracle. And all of this attests to the fact that this is God acting in human history.

Luke then is writing the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is really the account of divine intervention in human history. God supernaturally acting and He does it in ways the likes of which the world has never ever seen. Five hundred years since the last miracle, 800 years since a time of miracles, 500 years since an angel appeared, 400 years since God spoke...and now it all comes back in a volume and a quantity the likes of which it has never occurred before, nor since. God breaks His silence.

Luke, because he is the ever careful historian, understands the critical imperative, the critical importance of assuring his readers that the story of Jesus is not a human story. It's not a cultural myth. It's not a cultural legend. It's not a fantasy dreamed up by men. Luke wants us to understand that the story of Jesus is the revelation of the God of the universe and therefore Luke makes much of the miraculous element which has no human explanation. In fact, Luke begins his account, the first story Luke tells involves an angel from heaven, first time in 500 years, words from God, first time in 400 years, a miracle, the first time in 500 years, to be followed by other miracles, the first time in 800 years. It all breaks and Luke records it all.

The first miracle occurred at the promise of the first angel to appear in 500 years, as far as we know. Let's look at the text again starting in verse 5. "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias of the division of Abijah and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord, but they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years. Now it came about while he, that being Zacharias, was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by Lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering." Here it comes. "And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him and fear gripped him. 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. And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth. For he shall 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. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And 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.'" We'll stop at that point.

You remember from last time that Luke sets the timing in history for us in verse 5 by telling us it's in the days of Herod. Herod, as I said, from 37 B.C. to about 4 B.C., when you work the calendars out, that he would die...he would die about a year after the birth of Christ which occurred by our calendar adjustments in about 3 B.C. or so. Near the end of the reign of Herod this begins, 400 years after the last prophet.

And, you know, God is the God of small beginnings. God is the God of small beginnings, God does things that are so understated. In fact, as you go through the gospel of Luke you kind of wait for some trumpets to blow or some brass section to show up and do a fanfare. But it never happens. The miracles are just matter of fact, they're just stated in very...in very thoughtful and simple undertones. It's just very understated. It simply says in verse 11, "An angel of the Lord appeared to him." It doesn't say, "Ta-da-ta-da..." It doesn't say, "And the earth shook and heaven rattled and fire came out of the sky and smoke and an angel appeared." It doesn't say that. It's just an angel appeared. It's that...it's that understatement, it's that simplicity that makes the New Testament authors so believable. They don't try to embellish it. Now Luke doesn't say, "And I know you're going to find this hard to believe, folks, look, this is the way it was, like it or not, an angel of..." It doesn't say that. It doesn't have any need to prove itself. It doesn't bear any of those pressures that somebody trying to sell a lie might feel. Just very simply states an angel appeared. In verse 13, "And the angel said, you're going to have a child."

So you have an angel from heaven. You have a word from God and you have the promise of a miracle...the two people over 60, probably in their 70's, could have been in their 80's who can't have children because she's barren are going to have the miracle birth of a son. It all happens, Luke launches it all. Silence is broken, an angel appears and a miracle will happen.

Now the center stage in the opening part of this gospel is taken by a man named Zacharias. Zacharias is a common man, he's one of 18,000 or so, sons of Aaron who served as priests in the land, it says about him in verse 5, "There was a certain priest." I suppose if you could choose any adjective to describe yourself, "certain" wouldn't be one of the most glowing you could think about. He might have said, "A wonderful priest...a noble priest...a brilliant priest," but a certain priest? A very undistinguished guy, to be truthful, just one of many sons of Aaron. Undistinguished in terms of social status, although he was certainly respected. He was just a common but faithful and devout priest who married the daughter of a priest. It tells us that he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron. All the men who came from Aaron were priests, they were all in the priestly line, so her father was a priest and her grandfather and perhaps her brothers if she had them. Furthermore she was named Elizabeth, which I told you last time was the wife...the name of the wife of Aaron, so they gave her a name from the priestly family, the mother of all priests. So they must have been a devout family. Her

background was priestly. His background was priestly. And that was all good...that...that,,,that indicates a group of people who were devoted to the service of God.

Beyond their background is their character in verse 6. They were both righteous in the sight of God. They walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. And we saw that last time. They understood what a lot of people don't understand. They understood righteousness...that's a great concept.

I...I feel the tug to digress a little bit, I'm going to resist it, but righteousness is a concept that can be understood by three words...this is one of those summary things I'm going to give you. Righteousness is the kind...is the issue here. Righteousness can be sort of summarized in three words: law, grace and obedience. Righteousness is defined by law. Righteousness is defined by law. You want to know what righteousness is? What it is to be right with God? It's defined by the law. Read the law of God, that defines righteousness. Righteousness is empowered by grace. What happens is, you see the law which defines righteousness and you fall short, right? "There's none righteous, no not one." You fall short. How you going to be righteous? Well righteousness is empowered by grace. First of all, righteousness is imputed to us by grace and then it's imparted to us by grace. So righteousness is defined by law, we can't keep the law, we throw ourselves on the mercy of God and by His grace we're empowered to keep the law, both in our justification and our sanctification. Righteousness then is demonstrated by obedience. It is defined by law, it is empowered by grace, it is demonstrated by obedience.

Well, they understood that. By the way, if you want to look at that from the negative, legalism is law without grace. Antinomianism is grace without law. Self-righteousness is obedience to the externals of the law without the internal power of grace.

Well, this couple was not legalistic and they were not antinomian and they were not self-righteous. They revered the law for its holy morality. They understood the righteous standard, they knew they fell short. They received grace, they were therefore obedient in the power of that grace not only internally but externally to the depths of that law. And Luke makes a big point of this because he wants us to know that the New Testament is not in contrast with the Old, it is the fulfillment of the Old. It is the story of the final sacrifice that provided the righteousness that even Old Testament saints sought and received from God.

So we could say in terms of background, everything was fine with this couple. In terms of spiritual life, everything was fine with this couple. But in terms of the social, it wasn't because verse 7 says they didn't have a child and that was something that was tragic because it bore a stigma. Many of the Jews believed that if God cursed you, He would make you childless, and so this was some symbol of their wickedness and their sinfulness and they bore this social stigma of being barren and now they're in their 60's, 70's, 80's, whatever, they have no child and there's now no hope...no hope. Except by

the miraculous and miracles didn't happen.

And so we saw Zacharias' personal righteousness. Look at the second point, his priestly responsibility. This gets fascinating...his priestly responsibility. Now as a priest there were 18,000 of them, 24 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. And they would go down and for a full week they would do their priestly duty which was mostly making sacrifices. They were butchers. That's what they did all day and were covered from head to toe with blood...slaughtering animal after animal after animal for those who came to make sacrifices.

So it was his time and it says in verse 8, "It came about while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division. He was of the division of Abijah," remember that was one of the grandsons of Aaron and there were 24 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. And even under those orders they were divided into other orders and families. And his group was now serving in the temple for their week and he was just doing his duty there.

That was the common thing he was doing. The uncommon comes in verse 9, this is very much not routine. "According to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense." Now this...you've got to stop here again. Luke is very understated in what he says. You can't imagine what a thrill this was for Zacharias. I mean, there's no way to understand it unless you create some of the background. This is a great moment in this man's life.

The custom of the priestly office was this. 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, you remember, 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. In other words, his name was drawn. And it was a very, very great honor if your name was 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. And in order to spread it around, it could only happen once in your life. If you had ever done this, offered the burnt incense, you couldn't 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. Remember there was a court of the Gentiles and the women, and then there was the inner court of the Israelites and then there was what's called 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...what?...the Holy of Holies where the Ark of

the Covenant was which symbolized the presence of God. And 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 right 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 just...just barely outside the veil between the holy place and the Holy of Holies. To put it simply, 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 honor. God to them was at a distance and this was getting as near as you could get.

Though it stood, this golden incense altar, though it stood outside the Holy of Holies, it is associated with the Holy of Holies. For example, in Hebrews 9 verses 3 and 4 it associates the incense altar with the Holy of Holies. 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. Again I say, this is the holiest place that anyone could get but the high priest once a year.

Here's what he would have done that day, 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. There was an A.M. hour and a P.M. hour. But it's likely that the big crowd was at night and this is probably when it happened. This would be just after the evening sacrifice was made.

What he would do would be gather coals off of, using some utensils, gather coals off of the altar of the burnt offering, the brazen altar and he would place all these coals in a golden bowl. And 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'd never seen to the far end where he would find the golden altar of incense. There he would dump 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 didn't 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 dishonor God, do something trivial, do something blasphemous and it was a dangerous place to be...almost as dangerous as going inside the Holy of Holies. And 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'd have to put something under and drag him out.

So it was a frightening thing, in one sense. 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 the people, symbolic for the prayers for salvation, for repentance, prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers for the peace of Jerusalem, prayers for the coming of Messiah, prayers for blessing, prayers for family, prayers for the nation, prayers that the Savior would come and take away sin, prayers for the kingdom to come. All those things would be part of the praying of the people, and that's what was going on outside in verse 10, the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. They were actually 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 actually 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. And verse 11 says, and again in such understated tones, "And an angel of the Lord appeared to him." This didn't happen, folks. An angel of the Lord appeared to him. Now we go from his personal righteousness, his priestly responsibility to his prophetic revelation. God has stepped in, folks. God has invaded history. Eight hundred years without miracles, 500 years since the fiery furnace in Daniel, 400 years since God spoke, 500 years since an angel had been there and suddenly an angel. Zacharias was probably just about ready to leave. He saw that angel. 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. He knew about the last apparent appearance of an angel in a vision to Zechariah the prophet nearly 500 years before. But this wasn't like that. This wasn't really a vision. This was an actual angel. It was a vision but some visions are actually perceivable to the physical eye and some visions to the spiritual sight. He actually saw this angel standing to the right of the altar of incense.

Now what does that signify? Standing to the right of the altar of incense...what does that mean? I read some commentators on that. Some of them said, "Was standing to the right because the prayers of the people were right." "He was standing to the right because that's the side of blessing and that's the side of favor." And all the left-handed people go, "No." What is the significance...he was standing to the right? Is there some great spiritual lesson about standing to the right?

I remember when I was being asked some Bible questions one time, there was a discussion about the symbolic furniture in the tabernacle. Somebody asked me the question, what is the significance, what is the primary purpose of the board in the back wall of the tabernacle? And I answered, "To hold up the ceiling." I mean, really, folks, you don't want to get too carried away. The point that Luke is making here is this angel was present, this angel was present in actual physical form so that he could be specifically located. This is not an apparition, this is not some foggy thing, there was an angel there and he was standing right over there to the right side of the altar of incense between the altar of incense and the candelabra, the golden candelabra 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 and he was there and he was really there, and I can tell you exactly where he stood.

And what was his reaction to this incredible, unheard of event? Verse 12, "Zacharias was happy," no. "He was troubled when he saw him and fear gripped him." Listen, he was panicked. This didn't happen. An angel, by the way, 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. It says he was troubled, tarasso, the verb means startled...startled. Fear gripped him...that's an interesting word, ateroxtha(???), it means he was terrified, very strong. He was terrified. We have an English word that comes from that root, ataraxia, or ataraxic. Any of you in medicine might be familiar with that, that's a tranquilizer, an ataraxic, it...the alpha primitive negates the fear...negates the anxiety because taraxie(?), this term in its root, means to be terrified, it takes away the terror, an ataraxic. It's ataraxic if you look...ataraxic, look up in the dictionary, you'll find it means calmness. This is not calm, this is the opposite of being calm. He was terrified. But it was a normal reaction, it really was.

It was the reaction of Gideon in Judges 6 when a heavenly visitor confronted him. It was the reaction of Mannoah the father of Samson in Judges 13. In fact he said to his wife, "We're going to die...we're going to die. There's a visitor here from heaven, we're dead. In fact, I saw the Lord, we're dead." 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...or saying...holy, holy, holy, he immediately condemned himself, damned himself, pronounced judgment on himself, Daniel 6. It was the same reaction of Ezekiel the prophet in the first chapter of Ezekiel when he saw that almost indescribable presence of the glories of the throne of God, he says at the end of the chapter, "And when I saw it I fell on my face," sort of a going into an immediate crush of humility and sometimes into a comma. It was the same reaction of Daniel in Daniel 8 and in Daniel 10 when Daniel was confronted with a heavenly visitor. It was traumatic, it was terrifying.

Same thing happened to Mary. You look down in verse 29 in Luke 1. When the angel appeared to her she was greatly troubled at the angel's presence and at his statement. And he has to say to her

in verse 30, "Don't be afraid, Mary." And the shepherds in the second chapter of Luke. "The angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were terribly frightened. And the angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid.'"

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 comma. John the apostle when he saw the vision of the glorified Christ in Revelation chapter 1, he says literally, "I fell at His feet as a dead man." It just knocked him out with fear. A holy visitor from the presence of God shows up. You hear such folly, such worthless, useless pap being delivered by people today who supposedly have conversations with angels. It is and always has been an utterly terrifying thing.

Luke, by the way, likes to talk about this fear. He refers to it repeatedly through his gospel. He makes note of the fact that it's a frightening thing to encounter holiness from heaven. You'll see that in chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 5, chapter 7, chapter 8, you'll see it again in chapter 9 and then toward the end I think it's chapter 23.

So he had an appropriate response. Verse 13, "The angel of the Lord said to him," no doubt in an audible actual voice, "Don't be afraid, Zacharias." This isn't 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. And we will note that it occurs also in New Testament times only, however, at those special times of miraculous, divine intervention.

So here is a familiar greeting. 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're going back to Genesis 15 or at Revelation 1, they have to say, "Don't be afraid." Heavenly visitors have to quell fear.

And why not be afraid? This isn't a judgment visit. Zacharias would have known what the others knew, that God is a great judge of sin. That if the holy God, or a holy angel appears, that sin is manifest, that sin is revealed and that those...the presence of the holy being simply paints the picture blacker of one's own sinfulness. And so the fear of judgment sets in. This isn't a judgment visit. And by the way, 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 isn't a judgment visit.

On the contrary, this is a blessing. "For your petition has been heard." What's that petition? Some have suggested that he was praying for the salvation of Israel. Some have suggested he was praying at that very moment for the Messiah. It doesn't say that. Some say he was praying that the Savior would come, that the true lamb, the true sacrificial lamb would come. It doesn't say that.

What is the petition? I think the next statement of the angel tells you what it is, "For your petition has been heard and your wife, Elizabeth, will...what?...bear you a son." The Greek implies that this is a long-standing petition. It doesn't 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 didn't 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.

And again, aren't you sort of stunned by the understatement of that? The angel doesn't say, "Now, something's going to happen that you won't even believe. This thing is phenomenal." I'm going to...he could, you know, give you at least twenty angelic adjectives to describe this thing. "You old guy, you dead guy with the barren wife," he could of, you know, really built this thing....no, he doesn't do that. He just says, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son."

They had been so deeply burdened by this barrenness, asking God...and I know they were asking God probably mostly for a son. Why? Because he wanted to pass on the priesthood. And he comes with this very understated statement. Isn't it remarkable, also, the lack of fanfare in the beginning of the whole of the gospel record? Isn't it amazing that God is the God of small beginnings? God is the God of understatement? 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's incredible what God has done and does through one small beginning. And it all starts when he answers the prayer of a little couple, insignificant, a prayer for a child. And in answering their prayer, He answers the greatest longings of the world. It launches it all. Never underestimate what God has intended through small beginnings, through you.

Well, 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.'" Boy, that is a good name. I can't resist saying that. I'm grateful to my parents for it and to my grandparents for giving it to my father who passed it on to me and I passed it on to my oldest son and he passed it on to his oldest son. That's a good name. We have a picture in our house with my father, John, and me, John, and my son, John Matthew, and his son, John. And there all 25 years apart.

What does that name mean? It means "God is gracious." It means "God is gracious." From two words, actually God and favor, God is gracious. And the angel by giving him the name is saying God is about to explode upon the world His grace. Better than giving him the name, "God is really upset," "God has had enough." "God is gracious" signals the whole thing, doesn't it?

Well, there was a little debate about that. Look over in verse 59, and we'll get this to later, but I'll give you a little preview. "When the child was finally born they were going to call him Zacharias for his father." That was a nice gesture, wasn't it? Let's call him Zacharias for his father. "And his mother

answered and said, 'No indeed.'" And a lot of mothers have said that same thing through the years about a lot of different stuff, but she said, "No, indeed, not on your life, he shall be called John. And they said to her, 'There's nobody in your family, no one among your relatives called by that name, where did you get that name?' And they made signs to his father as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows." Now why are they making signs to him, why is he writing it? Because by this time he's deaf and dumb and I'll tell you how that happened next week. How would you like to be 80 and for the first time father a child and be deaf and dumb so you can't tell anybody about it? Well that's what happened to him. And there's more, but that's for next time. He made...they made signs to his father so the father asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John."

They were all astonished. So they named him what the angel said to name him, John. What a monumental moment. Verse 14, "The angel said to him, 'Don't be afraid,'" just the opposite. Verse 14, "You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth." This isn't something to be sad for, this is something to be glad for. There's going to be joy at his birth. There's going to be joy not only on your part, there's going to be joy on the part of a lot of people. You're going to have joy, that's a standard word for joy, you're going to have gladness. It basically means highest joy, joy in the highest. That is the highest supreme joy. You're 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? Because he's going to be the one, verse 15, who will be great in the sight of the Lord and drink no wine or liquor, be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. He will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. That's why they're going to rejoice because he's going to have a ministry of evangelization, he's going to turn people back to God. That's what he's going to do.

So when she had the child, over in verse 58, the neighbors and friends, everybody rejoiced. But when John grew up and preached, a whole nation rejoiced. And when the Messiah whom he announced came, the whole world rejoiced. Isn't God the God of small beginnings? Don't be afraid. This child will bring you joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth.

So the story is launched. God sends an angel. God speaks through that angel His message and God promises a miracle birth to this couple. And with that, divine intervention in the saga of salvation begins. Next Sunday I'm going to show you Zacharias' reaction and how he came to be deaf and dumb. Let's pray.

Father, Your Word is so filled with richness and practicality. It's just incredible to study the history of redemption as revealed in Scripture and see the remarkable way in which You used common people. You are the God of understatement in so many ways, and the God of small beginnings. You never

feel like you have to prove Yourself, to say it is enough. You never need the mighty and the great, You can do Your work with the ignoble and the weak and the poor and the common. We thank You, O God, for what You desire to do through our lives as You work Your mighty work, not in the miraculous physically, but certainly in the miracle work of salvation and sanctification spiritually. Use us, Lord, to bring joy and gladness to many. Use us to bring rejoicing to many because of the work You do in us. We thank You for the clarity of Scripture. We thank You for the unequivocal truth that this is the story of Your intervention. This is the gospel, the good news that the Savior came. We thank You for its unfolding and we pray that we might be transformingly enriched by understanding it in these days as You carry us through this truth. Use us, Lord, in those simple understated ways with small beginnings to do exceeding, abundantly above all we can ask or think according to the power that works in us to the glory of Jesus Christ alone, we pray. Amen.

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