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

A Faithful Promise to a Faithless Priest
Scripture: Luke 1:18-25
Code: 42-5

Luke chapter 1 is our text. We have begun a study of the gospel of Luke just a few weeks ago. This marvelous story of salvation recorded by the beloved physician, Luke. Luke is a very thoughtful and careful and fastidious historian who fills his history with the most interesting detail and is very careful to tell us everything that matters in the unfolding of the saga of salvation.

Let me read the account as Luke begins it in verse 5 of Luke 1. "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. 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 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. 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 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. 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.' And Zacharias said to the angel, 'How shall I know this for certain? For I'm an old man and my wife is advanced in years.' And the angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place because you did not believe my words which shall be fulfilled in their proper time.' The people were waiting for Zacharias and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple and he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And it came about when the days of his priestly service were ended, that he went back home. And after these days, Elizabeth, his wife, became pregnant and she kept herself in seclusion for five months saying, 'This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me to take away my disgrace among men.'"

When God chooses, He can speak and act in massive ways. When He chooses, He can create the universe in six days. When He chooses, He can flood the entire globe, drowning the entire human race except for eight souls and do it in 40 days of rain. When God chooses, He can send a shower of fire and brimstone and bury the city of Sodom, the city of Gomorrah and the cities of the plain at the south end of the Dead Sea. When God chooses, He can part a sea so that two million people can walk through on dry land and a following army be instantaneously drown as the sea which was parted closes on them. When God chooses, He can with His own finger write His law in stone on a mountain that is shaking with fire and brimstone. When God chooses, He can feed an entire population of people with food that He creates on the spot as He did the Israelites in the wilderness. When God chooses, He can make water come pouring out of solid rock. When God chooses, He can cause the formidable walls of an ancient city named Jericho to fall flat to the ground. When God chooses, He can open the ground and swallow people up. God can do astonishing, powerful, massive things.

I've been writing a commentary on the book of Revelation, I've finished the first volume of it this...well actually yesterday. And going through the book of Revelation with all those tremendous final judgments that God will bring upon the world, I was reminded of the fact that God is not through doing massive things. There will come a time in the future when God destroys a third of the oceans of the world, when He destroys a third of the fresh water of the world, when He destroys a third of the vegetation of the world. A time when this earth is devastated as a third of its population will die, a fourth of it already having perished under the holocaust of the time of Tribulation to come. There's coming a time when the heavens will roll up like a scroll, when the sun goes dark and the moon, of course, therefore cannot shine. A time when the earth experiences meteoric showers, the likes of which even the doomsday prophets can't anticipate. There comes a time, according to the apostle Peter, when God will cause the elements to melt with fervent heat. It's an act of uncreation as God implodes the entire universe and replaces it with a new heaven and a new earth. When God wants to speak in a cataclysm, He can do it.

But mostly, God is the God of small beginnings. He's the God who works with common people in ordinary ways in life. You would think that the story of salvation, the saga of the Redeemer, the Messiah having come would start with some fanfare, maybe some cataclysmic events. But the story of salvation, the saga of the arrival of the Messiah starts with a common couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth. He's so undistinguished that the only adjective used to describe him is that he was a certain priest, not even a notable one, not a brilliant one, not a famous one, just a certain one, of which there were about 18,000 at that time in the line of Aaron the priest who served as priests in Israel. So many that they were divided into twenty-four orders and they only were allowed to serve two weeks a year because there were so many of them. He was a common man. He married a woman named Elizabeth who came from a priestly line. She was the daughter of a priest and had been given the name Elizabeth in honor of the wife of Aaron, the first high priest whose wife had the

same name. So, he married a girl who came out of a priestly background and, of course, he did, and so they shared a rich, religious heritage in Judaism. But they were just plain common people. Except for the two weeks that he served at the temple and the three main feasts of Israel when he was in Jerusalem, the rest of the time he just lived life in his village and helped people and counseled people and taught them Scripture.

The story begins with this very common couple. This isn't unusual for God. Abraham was a man who was a common wanderer, an old man. He and his wife had no children. He was nomadic. God picked him out of all of human kind and made him the father of the Jewish nation through which would come the Scripture and the Messiah, the Savior of the world. And there was Isaac after him and there was Jacob and there was Joseph, the patriarchs we call them, with all their foibles and all their sins and all their failures and all their weaknesses. Their lives, frankly, were void of the miraculous. Their lives were just filled with the common stuff, the common struggles of life in a sinful world and yet redemptive history worked its way through them.

Then there was Moses who was a cast-off baby floating down the river in a basket, rescued by an Egyptian princess. There was Moses, impulsive, impatient, stuttering, lacking confidence, proud, disobedient. Yet to him was given the privilege of being the recipient of the divine law of God, where God established His law forever, giving to mankind the righteous standard for all people of all times. Then there was David, a simple shepherd, a poet, a singer, a song writer. David who became a soldier, David who became a murderer, David who became an adulterer. David, a poor father who had a rebellious son. David who was both strong and weak, who was both confident and vacillating, who at times was proud and other times was humiliated by his sin. And there were the prophets, common men, simple men, herdsmen and farmers. God used them to speak His profound divine truth.

And then there were the Apostles. And the Apostles themselves were the commonest of men, farmers and fishermen and a despised tax collector. They were weak. They were doubting. They were ignorant. They were struggling with selfish greed and wrong motivation. They were uneducated. They came from Galilee which was considered the place of the uneducated. And yet they were the mighty force that God used to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and from them it went until its reached the world and including us. God is the God of the common man. God is the God of small beginnings. God uses not many noble, and not many mighty but God has chosen the simple and the humble and the base things through which to effect His glorious purposes.

And that's precisely how Luke begins his story. It's the story of the most uncommon event the world ever knew, the coming of the Messiah and Savior of the world. But it has such a common beginning with such a common couple. Now remember, when Luke begins the story it has been 400 years since there was any word from God...400 years of heaven's silence. It has been 500 years since the visit of an angel. It has been over 500 years since that isolated miracle of the fiery furnace during the

time of Daniel. And it's been 800 years since miracles came in a group and that was at the time of Elijah and Elisha. God hasn't acted, God hasn't spoken, God hasn't sent an angel in centuries. Heaven has been silent for a long time.

But no more. In verse 11, "An angel of the Lord appeared." Not only did that angel appear, but verse 13 said, "The angel spoke." So here we have the silence of heaven broken. An angel appears, there hasn't been one in 500 years. God speaks, He hasn't spoken in 400 years. Miracle happens, there hasn't been one in over 500 years, and it initiates an almost endless stream of miracles that go all the way through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the Apostles. This is the launch pad for the great saga of redemption surrounding the arrival of the Messiah and Savior of the world. And it has the simplest beginning. Zacharias is the main character.

We remember his personal righteousness from verses 5 to 7. We studied that already. He and his wife came from a priestly background. They were true believers in the living God. They were saints of God. They had received salvation. They had received righteousness from God, granted to them by their faith and they were walking in faithful obedience to the law of God. However, verse 7 says they had no child and in the Jewish culture that could look like a curse from God and they bore the stigma and the disgrace of that. We saw the personal righteousness of Zacharias in verses 5 to 7. We saw his priestly responsibility in verses 8 to 10. He was in the order of Abijah, one of the twenty-four orders of the priesthood named after the grandsons of Aaron. And those priests would serve, as I said, two different weeks a year in Jerusalem. It was his time so he was in Jerusalem at the temple doing his priestly duty. He was chosen by lot to a special task and that was to go inside the holy place in the temple, to the altar of incense. They did that at the time of the morning sacrifice, at the time of the evening sacrifice, twice a day, that was a great privilege for a priest. It was by lot that you were chosen and some priests were never chosen and a priest could only be chosen once in his life to do it so they could pass it around. This would have been the high point of his priestly life, to go into the holy place and to have the privilege of putting the incense on the altar of incense because, you see, that was as close to the presence of God as he would ever get since the altar of incense was just outside the veil that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies. This was the high point of all his priestly service. He was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. Only special priests chosen by lot would ever do that. No common person would ever go in there, and only the high priest could go further into the Holy of Holies and that only once a year. So this was the pinnacle of the service. So in he went.

He wasn't going to stay long. He had a little bowl full of the burning coals from off the brazen altar, the altar of burnt offering. He took it in, he dumped the coals into the altar of incense, spread them around and then put the incense on and a great cloud of incense would arise, symbolizing the prayers of the people. He was in there doing that, verse 10 says, the people were outside doing exactly what he was symbolizing, they were praying on the outside.

And while he was in there, and it was only a brief visit, it didn't take very long, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. This takes us to the third point, from his personal righteousness and his priestly responsibility, to his prophetic revelation. Here something happens that just didn't happen...an angel appeared. This is real. And he tells us he was standing to the right of the altar of incense, that doesn't have any mystical value, that isn't any spiritual message, that is the way to tell us that this actually happened and that angel was locatable. This wasn't a fantasy. This wasn't a figment of his imagination. This wasn't some kind of esoteric mind elevation. An angel came, took on form and stood in a place that he could identify. And verse 12 says Zacharias was troubled when he saw him and fear gripped him. He was absolutely terrified. He knew this..although this was a...in a form, the angel was in a form that he could perceive and see, he realized that he had a heavenly visitor. This didn't happen, as I said. If you go back in recorded history, it's been 500 years since an angel appeared to Zechariah. Here was an angel and panic set in.

In verse 13 the angel said to him the most unthinkable thing, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, your petition has been heard." They had prayed for years for a child, probably ceased praying in recent years since they were so old. The indication that they were old, advanced in years in verse 7, means they were over 60 and since there was no retirement age for a priest, they could have been in their 70's or their 80's. He says your petition has been heard, your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will give him the name John, which means God is gracious, or favor from God.

This angel shows up, panic sets in. The angel says the most unthinkable thing, "Your wife is going to have a baby. Your prayer is answered." This would have to be a miracle. This would be the first miracle recorded in the history of God's unfolding redemption since the fiery furnace over 500 years ago. Miracles didn't happen. This isn't a time of miracles. Miracles don't happen around the world. When they do happen they happen in the narrow band of that redemptive nation called Israel. And it happened for a long time. What do you mean? This would have to be a miracle and he knew that.

So the Lord had finally spoken. An angel had appeared to announce a miracle. God was intervening in human history. "And you will...verse 14 says...have joy and gladness." That's for sure! That's for sure! Their stigma was going to be gone. Their disgrace was going to be gone and they were going to be a happy couple. Furthermore, many will rejoice at his birth, the angel said. Over in verse 58 when the child was born, it says the neighbors and relatives of Elizabeth heard the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her and they were rejoicing with her. So you'll rejoice and your neighbors will rejoice, but it will go way beyond that, the whole world is going to rejoice. Israel is going to rejoice. Why? Verse 15, "For this child will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will drink no wine or liquor. Be filled with the Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. Will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God." That's why many will rejoice because through John's ministry they'll turn to God. Further, "He will be the forerunner of the Messiah," verse 17 says. "He will be the one coming in the spirit and the power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children

and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make a people ready to receive the Lord, ready to receive the Messiah." This is an incredible revelation. And I'm going to say next Sunday more about John the Baptist. I want to take verses 15 to 17 and describe John the Baptist in one message, I'll do that next week.

But he tells this incredible revelation from God to Zacharias. This child is going to come and he's going to bring you joy and he's going to bring your family and your friends joy and he's going to bring a message of rejoicing to the whole nation Israel because they're going to repent and come back to God. And he's going to point to the Messiah that's going to be the Savior of the world. And consequently the joy is going to extend to the ends of the earth and the end of time. He's going to be the forerunner of the Messiah. Your son's going to be a prophet of God. He's going to come in the same spirit and power that Elijah came. He's going to have a powerful impact on Israel. He's going to turn their hearts to God. He's going to be a man filled with the Holy Spirit, even from the time he was in the womb.

Bottom line, this son that they were going to have was going to be extraordinary, so extraordinary that he would be...he would have the greatest privilege that ever could come to a Jew. He would have the greatest privilege imaginable, the greatest privilege that any man could ever hope for, a privilege that no one had ever experienced...he would have the privilege of being the first person to identify the Messiah. What a privilege.

The prophets had talked about the Messiah, but none could ever point to Him. John would say, pointing to Jesus one day, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John would have the greatest privilege any prophet could ever have, he would be the greatest of the prophets because he would be the one to point to and identify the long-awaited Messiah and Savior of the world. Can you imagine how great a privilege that is? Let me remind you. You have the same privilege. This was some announcement.

Now we've seen his personal righteousness, his priestly responsibility, his prophetic revelation. Look at point four, his perfidious response. Perfidious...you say? Where did you get that? You were just looking for a "p" and you made that up. Not really. I wanted the right word so I got out my Oxford Dictionary which I can only read with a magnifying glass and I started looking for a word and I found this word "perfidious." You know what it means? That which doubts...that which distrusts. Perfidy is faithlessness, doubt, that's the perfect word and it just so happened to start with a "p". Must be divine intervention. Look at his response, verse 18.

Zacharias, of all the things he could have said to the angel, look what he says, "How shall I know this for certain? For I'm an old man and I am married to an old lady," that's a sort of a free translation but that's exactly what he said. "I mean, this is ridiculous, what makes you think I'm supposed to believe this?"

You know, he could have said so much. He could have said, "I'm overwhelmed, sir. I...why would you...why me? Would you pass my thanks unto God? But he didn't. He was a skeptic. "How shall I know this for certain? I'm old and she's old, this can't happen." Miracles don't happen. I don't believe you. In the first place, angels don't show up. In the second place, God doesn't speak. And in the third place miracles don't happen. And this would require a miracle."

He knew that. He knew they were past child-bearing age and even when they were in the normal years of child bearing capacity, she was barren. And isn't it amazing, he'd been praying all this time for a child and God sends an angel to announce he's going to have one and he doesn't believe it? It reminds me of the people praying for Peter in Acts 12? Remember that story. They're having a prayer meeting cause Peter's in prison. "O God, get Peter out of prison." Well the Lord lets him out and he comes to the house to tell them he's out. He knocks on the door and the girl goes to the door and it's Peter and she goes back and says it's Peter. And they say, "Can't be, he's in prison." Not exactly great faith, huh?

Well it was the same kind of thing. He prays all those years for a son. God gives him an answer and he doesn't believe it. Perfidiously, he asks, how shall I know this for certain? Now in the long past Abraham, Genesis 15 and Gideon, Judges 6, and Hezekiah, 2 Kings 20, they also asked God for more explanation when He had spoken to them things that were hard to understand. But none was as outright overtly unbelieving as Zacharias. He was a good man. He was a child of God. But this was too much, he just couldn't believe this. He needed stronger evidence, stronger evidence than a word from God? You remember what Jesus said? If they don't believe Moses and the prophets, if they don't believe the Scripture, they won't believe the one...what?...is raised from the dead. And you remember what Peter said in 2 Peter 1, he said, "Look, I was there at the Mount of Transfiguration, I saw the whole thing, I saw Christ in His glory, I saw Him peel His flesh back and reveal His manifest glory as God, I saw all that but we have a more sure word than my experience which is this." What could be more sure than a word from God?

He didn't believe the Word of God. That's serious. Serious to disbelieve the Word of God. And the angel's response is appropriate, "The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel.'" Who do you think you're talking to, buddy? I'm not just some guy who...I am Gabriel. "Who stands in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news." And by the way, the Greek on the phrase "I am Gabriel," is very emphatic. This is not just a common visitor. This is Gabriel.

Now there are...there are myriads and myriads of angels, ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands is the way the Bible in the book of Revelation describes them. Now we don't know the exact number of angels, but there are numerous angels, uncountable numbers of angels that God created and that are holy and in His presence. Only two of them are named in the Bible,

only two holy angels are named...Michael who is sort of super-angel. He shows up when there's a battle to fight. And Gabriel, who is God's number-one messenger with the mega messages. When there's a massive message to deliver like the whole of redemptive history in the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom, he is sent to Daniel to deliver that one. Or when Messianic story begins and is inaugurated with the birth of the forerunner, John the Baptist, he shows up to make the announcement to this humble priest. This is important stuff. It was Gabriel who came later in verse 26 to Mary with the announcement that she would bear the Messiah. It was Gabriel who came to Daniel in chapter 9 and told him about the history of redemption, right on to the kingdom of Christ. He is seen with these monumental glorious messages from God. Gabriel means "mighty one of God." He says, "I'm Gabriel, I'm not just your common run-of-the-mill holy angel. I'm Gabriel." This is a big message you're getting.

It's interesting, why would he introduce himself as Gabriel? Because this is a man who knew the Old Testament and Gabriel appeared in the book of Daniel and Gabriel came with these earth-shattering messages, monumental ones. "And I stand in the presence of God, I'm coming down from the very throne room and I've been sent by God." Angels are always sent by God. They don't act independently. They are perfect ambassadors for God, perfect emissaries, perfect messengers because they only do what God sends them to do and say what He sends them to say. God is the king of the angels and He sends them with His messages. You can read how God sent angels back in Exodus 23, Exodus 32, Exodus 33, Numbers chapter 20, 1 Chronicles 21, 2 Chronicles 32, Daniel 3, Daniel 6, Daniel 8, Daniel 9, Daniel 10. God dispatches angels with His messages. And he says," I came to bring you good news. This is what I get from you? I brought you good news. This isn't a message of judgment. I know you were afraid, as verse 12 indicates, but I came with good news. This news is so good it's going to make you rejoice, going to make everybody around you rejoice, going to make people in Israel rejoice, going to make the world rejoice. This is good news."

Those words "good news" translate the Greek word euangelizo or euangelion from which we get the gospel, which is the old English word for good news. Luke loves this word, he uses it about ten times and it's never in the other gospels except once in Matthew 11. Luke loves the word "good news." It's the best news. What is the good news? God is sending a Savior to die for your sins so that you can spend forever in heaven...that's the good news. And it all gets launched with the arrival of His forerunner.

Well as good as the news was, Zacharias couldn't believe it. So we see his perfidious response. And that turns in to his punishing reproof. That was easy.

Verse 20, verse 20, and this is something, "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place because you did not believe my words which shall be fulfilled in their proper time." I mean, just on a human level, if you had never been able to have a child and you were in your 70's, let's say, taking mid-ground, and all of a sudden you were going to have a baby,

you'd be wanting to talk about it. He couldn't. He wasn't even going to be able to tell the wonderful story that he was in...what a story, I mean, you go back to your little village and say, "Guys, guess what happened to me while I was down there. I went into the holy place and an angel came to me and an angel made this promise," and so forth. He can't tell the story. He can't even hear the questions that are asked because he's deaf.

Over in verse 62 they made signs to him. They made signs to him, talking here about Zacharias. They were...the child was born at this time, they were going to name him, so they started making signs. The reason they made signs to him because he couldn't hear. And he asked for a tablet and wrote, he couldn't speak so he had to write down on the tablet, "His name is to be John." He was deaf and mute. This is pretty severe. It's merciful in that it's temporary. It's severe in itself. If you're going to be so unbelieving as not to hear God's Word, then you're not going to be able to speak it. If you're so faithless as not to believe, you're going to be useless in the proclamation.

So God shut him up and that was an every day, every moment reminder of his sin of unbelief. And when people said, "What happened to you?" He would have to write out, "I was made mute by an angel because I didn't believe when God spoke to me."

Wouldn't it be good if God did that to people who didn't believe His Word? Then we'd know who they were. The problem is, we would go in and out of being mute most of our lives, I'd think.

God shut him up. His normal duty was to teach the Old Testament and tell people about God and give them counsel and wisdom. That's what a priest did during the most of his year. He couldn't tell this wonderful story. He couldn't do anything but bear the shame of having been made deaf and dumb by an act of judgment from God.

And it wasn't going to change, it says, until the day, verse 20, when these things take place. When the child is born, I'll reverse this. Go over to verse 64. The child was born. Verse 57, the child was born, Elizabeth brought him forth. All the family had a great rejoicing. They circumcised him. They decided they'd call him Zacharias after his father, which was a common thing to do. His mother said, "No, he's going to be called John." And they said, "Well there's nobody in your family named John, why are you going to call him John?" They made signs to his father trying to tell him they're going to call him Zacharias. He grabbed a tablet, wrote: "His name is John." They were all astonished. Verse 64, bang! at once his mouth was open, his tongue loosed and he began to speak. And the first thing he did was...what?...praise God.

And I think that's the point. He was a true believer. He had been told by an angel he was going to have a son. The son was going to be the forerunner of the Messiah. His son was going to be the greatest preacher Israel had ever known. A father would be proud of that. His son would turn many hearts to God. He wanted to praise God for that but he couldn't, he was mute. He couldn't praise

God. His tongue was stopped. The first time it got loosed, all that pent up praise over nine months long came gushing out. That's a punishment in itself, isn't it?, not being able to praise God.

I love the way the verse ends, verse 20, "This is going to happen to you because you didn't believe my words," listen to this, "which shall be fulfilled in their proper time." Mark it, God is sovereign and He will do His plan and it does not rise or fall on the faith of men. God is sovereign. What changes is not the plan but your part in its unfolding. Faithless people don't change the plan, they just forfeit the blessedness of doing in it what God would want them to do. It will come. It will happen, just the way we said it will happen. Too bad you won't be able to be a part of the proclamation of that great reality.

Learn to hear God's Word because, if I may say so, you will never be given the privilege of proclaiming it if you're not willing to hear it with faith. Great redemptive acts will occur in God's time, with or without your faith. Better you should believe God and participate and enjoy the privilege of participation as long...as well as its eternal reward.

Well, meanwhile back outside. Can you believe we've been in the temple all this time? Meanwhile, back outside, verse 21, "The people were waiting for Zacharias and wondering at his delay in the temple." Whoa, something's going on in there. You get in there, you do that thing and you get out of there. They were used to that. The priest went in every day in the morning and every day in the evening, and he came back out. How long does it take to put those coals there? And to throw the incense on, watch the smoke go up and get out? They're outside. They're in the court of Israel, outside the sanctuary proper, which was made up of the holy place and the Holy of Holies. They're outside, they're out there, as we noted in verse 10, praying.

Now when somebody doesn't come out, when the priest doesn't come out, there's a delay, the first thought on their mind is that he's been judged by God. You know, that would be...maybe this temptation that he gets in there and he's over at the altar of incense and he's so close to the Holy of Holies he just....I mean, he can't resist a peek, and whoof...he's gone. Or maybe he did something he shouldn't have done, you know, maybe he was...maybe he was doing something that wasn't prescribed. Remember Leviticus 10, there was Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, priests. Took their respective fire pans with the coals, after putting the fire in them, placed incense on it, they were going to do the incense offering, but they offered strange fire. It doesn't tell us what it was but it wasn't what it's supposed to be and fire came right out of the presence of God, right out from the place where God's presence was and incinerated them, Leviticus 10. So Moses said to Aaron, "Better be careful what you're doing when you're over there by that Holy of Holies, don't uncover your heads, don't tear your clothes, don't even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting, don't drink wine or strong drink, don't go in an inebriated situation or you'll die," he said in every condition, Leviticus 10:1 to 9. It's fatal.

There was poor Uzzah, I always think about poor Uzzah. Uzzah was just this plain ole guy and they were moving the ark of the covenant. And God said, "Put it on poles, don't touch it, and carry it on shoulders." Poles going through the rings on the sides, and just carry it that way. They thought they had a better idea and they put it on a cart and they shouldn't have done that. God wants things done His way and He was trying to teach them a lesson.

Well, they were clunking along with this cart on the road, it hit a pothole and the ark kind of jumped off the cart, started to fall off. And Uzzah wanting to protect it from hitting the ground touched it and instantly died. Poor Uzzah. It wasn't his plan. But God was sending a message. I want reverence and holiness. And He gave them some external ways to illustrate what He wanted out of a heart attitude.

So you know, the first thing they would have thought, according to the Talmud, the priest was to go in and do his work and get out of there as fast as he could. The longer you stayed in there, the more potential for death there might be if you did anything offensive or blasphemous to God. They're on the outside and they're saying, "Where is the guy?"

Verse 22, he finally comes out and he can't speak. He was supposed to give a speech. That's right, there's a standard benediction that he was to give when he came out. They all gave it. Numbers 6:24, listen to these words, this is what he said when he came out, "The Lord bless you and keep you, The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace." That beautiful benediction, that's what the priest said when he came up. But he just came out...nothing, he couldn't speak. Somehow they realized he was unable...they realized because he was unable to speak and because of his countenance, they realized he had seen a vision in the temple. They didn't know what it was, the vision being sort of a generic word for whatever he saw. How would they know that? Oh, I think he had a shocked look on his face, to put it mildly. He was probably so awestruck in his countenance and perhaps feeling guilty and crushed, he might have had some sort of beggarly body language since he had just been devastated by being made deaf and dumb. And he trying to communicate, the end of verse 22, kept making signs to them. He didn't know sign language, believe me, he was new to this world of being deaf and not being able to speak. And I don't know whether he went like.....you know, how do you describe an angel, you know, I don't know what he did. For you on tape, I was flapping my hands, you know. He tried to tell them what happened the best way he could.

Verse 23, "It came about when the days of his priestly service were ended," the week was over, "he went back home." That's kind of a plain ending, isn't it, to a phenomenal week? The rest of the week he just went around doing his duty as a priest, butchering animals day after day after day after day, deaf and mute. And the week was over and he went home.

Now his wife would be waiting for him and he wouldn't be the same guy that left. It doesn't say anything about the meeting. I wish there was a paragraph in there where he tries to explain to his wife what happened. Why aren't you talking to me? she said. What are you hiding? You know how the conversation went. You've been gone for a week, what...come on, speak up, what's going on?

The whole drama unfolds and it doesn't tell us that. It doesn't matter in the redemptive plan. He just went home and he can't do any of his normal teaching. It simply says in verse 24, here's the finale, after his punishing reproof we come to the epilogue, verse 24, "After these days, Elizabeth his wife became pregnant." Stop right there...I just. It just seems like it ought...there ought to be a fanfare, something here, doesn't it to you? This is just such an understatement. It's very important Luke wants you to know that she didn't get pregnant until he came home, less some false accusation be made against her, some assumption that maybe another man was involved in his...in this. He came home, Luke says, and after these days she became pregnant.

That is a miracle, folks. That's the launch miracle of the New Testament. That's the launch miracle of the saga of salvation. That's the beginning of the unfolding of the age of miracles surrounded Jesus and the apostles. A miracle happens to this old couple and she becomes pregnant.

It says also, "She kept herself in seclusion for five months." She kept herself in seclusion for five months? Why? Well, they knew she was barren, everybody knew she was barren, hadn't had any children. If she started announcing everywhere that she was pregnant, who's going to buy it? They're going to say...Not only is she barren, but she's lost her mind. And in those days they wore a loose-fitting robe, but five months pregnant? Then the message becomes believable. Rather than go out and get more disgrace, rather than go out and get more shame, rather than go out and try not to say you're pregnant when you are and not to want to tell everybody about this astounding, amazing, supernatural miracle, all I know is my husband went to work down at the temple, he came back a week later and I'm pregnant. I don't know. He's telling me with signs and writing down that an angel came and promised him a son and said the son would be the announcer of the Messiah.

I mean, to tell that story when you weren't pregnant, people would say...You know, this is bizarre, we knew this woman, she seemed normal, this is outrageous. She's a sweet lady and she's wise. She stays in seclusion, even her relative Mary didn't know she was pregnant, the angel came and told Mary that she was in her sixth month of pregnancy. The angel told Mary that over in verse 36. This is the great initial miracle. It took a miracle for this conception to take place.

She knew it was a miracle because when she did speak of it she said this, verse 25, "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me to take away my disgrace among men." As I told you, barrenness was a kind of shame in the Jewish society, a disgrace. You remember Hannah had that disgrace in 1 Samuel 1 and cried and her husband came and found her weeping and crying because she didn't have a child. The Lord...she said...did this, the Lord has dealt

with me, the Lord has looked with favor on me. The Lord has taken away my disgrace among men. She knew God had done this miracle. As I said, this begins the story of salvation where the silence of heaven ends and God who at one time spoke in time past through the fathers by the prophets is now about to speak through His Son.

Now this couple is a picture of true believers. In, I think, every time and place they were obscure, they were humble, common, righteous, obedient, prayerful, serving...at the same time doubting, fearful and even chastened. Sounds like us, doesn't it? God blessed them sometimes because of themselves and sometimes in spite of themselves, God used them. God is the God of humble beginnings. And God is the God of humble people. God used them and God uses us. What a great blessing. And the profound truth about their son, I shared with you earlier and I reiterate in conclusion, is that he had the greatest privilege any Jew had ever had and that was to point to the Messiah, a privilege which every one of us have as well. And God is still using the common people. This is not the tie of miracles anymore. This is not the time of cataclysmic divine intervention. This is the time for faithful folks like us to proclaim the truth of the Savior. Next time we'll look at John, the greatest man who ever lived up until his time.

Father, thank You for this time this morning in Your Word, for this great, great account. Thank You that You did break in to the silence of history and give the greatest message ever, the good news that a Savior was coming who would die on the cross for our sins, who would rise again from the grave to provide life. We thank You for that glorious truth, that great story, the greatest story ever told. We thank You that it is undeniable because it was attended to with miracles, starting with the conception of John the Baptist through a myriad of miracles at the hands of Jesus and the apostles, attesting to the fact that You indeed were working through appearances of angels and messages from heaven. We thank You that we can look back into that great and glorious time when the gospel was unfolded to us, the same gospel which we believe and by which we are saved, and the same gospel which we proclaim to the world. Continue to use it mightily for the salvation of sinners for which we shall ever praise You, in Your Son's name. Amen.

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