



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Characters & Surprises (Luke 1:5ff)

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Old Zacharias is promised a son Through unbelief is left smitten, dumb. (Luke 1)

*5*In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a 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 happened that 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. *6*And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. *7*And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. *8*Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. *9*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. *10*"You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. *11*"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. *12*"And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. *13*"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." *14*Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." *15*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. *16*"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 will be fulfilled in their proper time. *17*The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. *18*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. *19*When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. *20*After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, *21*"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."

Three Characters and Four Surprises

First Character: **Herod**. Israel and Judah had been without a king for quite some time. During the time of their Independence (163-63 BC) there had been no king, but events transpired subsequent to their association with Rome such that this Idumean, Herod, had obtained the throne. At age 25 he had been such an effective administrator as governor of Galilee that Rome appointed him

King of Judea. Herod, labeled The Great, since there will be a number of Herod's in the biblical record, is an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. The name Edomite was changed to Idumean under the period of Alexander the great. His reign is easily characterized in three words: Capable, Crafty, and Cruel.

Capable. Herod initially consolidated Judea and made it prosperous. He won the hearts of the people by significantly reducing taxes and during a terrible famine, sold off the royal gold plate to purchase food for the populace. His building feats are legendary-most significant among them would be the Temple, the seaport of Caesarea, and the fortresses of Herodium, Masada, and Gamal. **Craftiness** is apparent in the manner in which he was able to maneuver himself when called back to Rome during a period of domestic disturbances as well as his conduct with the Magi seeking the birthplace of Jesus. **Cruelty** is seen in the murder of one of his ten wives and two of his son's because of his paranoia, as well as what came to be known as the **Slaughter of the Innocents** when the Magi did not report back to him regarding the location of Jesus. His cruelty became legend when Caesar Augustus said something to the effect it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons.

Second Character, **Zacharias**. He is a lowly priest of the division of Abijah and his name means Jah Remembers. There were 24 divisions in the priesthood, each division named after one of the sons of Aaron. The division of Abijah was one of the divisions which did not return following the captivity in Babylon. The 24 divisions were reconstituted after the return continuing the original names. Each division served for one week in Jerusalem on two separate occasions each year. During their service the priests remained in Jerusalem, returning to their homes following their tour of duty. The name, Zacharias, gives some indication of the faith of his parents. He is stated to be upright before God and walking blameless in the commandments and ordinances. In the context of the religious corruption of that day, this was a singular testimony. He was married, childless, and old. Without children, they would be dependent on the system to care for them when Zacharias could no longer minister at the temple.

Third Character: **Elizabeth**. She is a daughter out of the line of Aaron and her name means "oath of God". Her name is that of Aaron's wife¹. She is also noted as a woman of piety. Taken in the context of her barrenness and the associated cultural stigma which she alone would bear, this is a signal observation. Undoubtedly,

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Luke mentions her piety so as to make certain Theophilus and any others who read will not assign her barrenness to any cause other than God having chosen to keep her womb closed. In terms of her childless status, she is in the line of many other noble Israelite women beginning with Sarah on up to Hannah and the mother of Samson. Only Sarah and Elizabeth of these noble women were well beyond the years of childbearing.

Application

Zachariah and Elizabeth afford us two glowing examples of light shining in darkness. Their generation will be labeled by Jesus as **wicked and perverse**. Time and again in the course of His ministry, Jesus will illustrate the infidelity of the nation in terms of their religious leaders and the people at large. Yet these two were deemed faithful. These two undoubtedly kept themselves in adherence to Micah's dictum relative to God's requirement: Do Justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly.² Each of us can manifest a similar piety in our respective generation, regardless of surrounding circumstances.

Surprise #1

He is chosen by the roll of the dice³ to serve at the Altar of incense. Procedurally, twice a day a priest would enter the Holy place to trim and clean the Altar of incense. This meant a total of fourteen priests would be needed each week of service. By the time of Zacharias, the number of priests within each division was such that the odds of being selected were remote, at best. He has already experienced this rolling of the dice many times before without being chosen, so it is easy to imagine his surprise when selected. Once selected, he will no longer be eligible for this duty, so this is a big deal!

Surprise #2

Now, standing before the Altar of incense his eyes are opened in the sense of being able to see the angel standing before him! Wow! Hundreds of years have passed since there has been an angelic visitor or a word from God. Amos has prophesied this "famine for the word of God"⁴ and following Malachi's prophetic ministry there has been a very long silence.

Zacharias is gripped with fear? He may have wondered, "Have I done something wrong?" His response mirrors that of Daniel when visited by the same angel centuries before.⁵

Surprise #3

Gabriel is quick to calm his fear and to speak a word of encouragement relative to his prayer for a child. One wonders how long it had been since they had prayed for a child. We are told they were well advanced in years, meaning beyond child-bearing. It is doubtful Zacharias was praying for a child as he ministered before the Altar of Incense given his response to the message. But, not only will they have a child, but this child will be the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah⁶ and from Malachi.⁷

Surprise #4

Someone once said, "Be careful what you ask for". Zacharias was in the grip of unbelief and because of that, unfit to pronounce a blessing on the crowd waiting for him to return. His actions when he came out prompted the crowd to think he had had a vision in the temple, but he couldn't relate anything to them. The text says he was to be unable to speak (verse 20), but later, in verse 62 we will see that he was also probably unable to hear. (This state may have been a blessing to Elizabeth!)

Application

Verse 23 tells us Zacharias continued his priestly duties til the tour of duty ended. This again speaks to his character. Though he has just had the most memorable experience of being the first recipient of God's word in 400 years, there is a duty to be attended to, first. Zacharias is a faithful man, one who attends to his duties. We, also, are called to be faithful in our duties.⁸

Question

What do you think might be some of the implications behind Zacharias' question to Gabriel?

¹ Exodus 6:23

² Micah 6:8

³ Prov. 16:33

⁴ Amos 8:11

⁵ Daniel 8:16, 9:21

⁶ Isaiah 40:3 & Matt. 3:1-3

⁷ Malachi

⁸ Luke 16:10-12