

**READ:** Luke 1:5-25 (NIV)

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

ENTER THE STORY:

Have you ever tried blinking quickly or rubbing your eyes to make sure what you were seeing was REAL? That's what I imagine happened when Zechariah opened his eyes and saw the angel standing in front of him.

Fortunately for Zechariah, Gabriel's first words were the traditional greeting of an angel with good news, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard..." **What prayer had been heard?** Was it the same prayer Abraham and Sarah had prayed many years earlier – that God would give them a child? Well, YES, but during that exact moment, Zechariah was performing one of the most serious tasks for a priest. He was burning incense in front of the veil in the Holy Place. This means he would have been offering up the traditional prayers for the salvation of Israel and the world, and those prayers were also going to be answered!

Gabriel's announcement is about an event in the future, but it is also about the past because, like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth were also unable to have children and were past the age of childbearing. The author does this on purpose. We are supposed to understand that these two stories are connected!

What is the connection?

• *Zechariah's son will pave the way for God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham... that one of his future great, great, great, grandsons would bless the whole world.*

• *BUT WAIT!* There is more! When Gabriel prophesied to Zechariah that his son would be similar to Elijah, he was pointing back to the final verses in the Old Testament: *Malachi 4:5-6, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."*

• It was all starting to come together. The prophecies from the Old Testament were beginning to unfold right before Zechariah's eyes, and even though he had every reason to believe, his concern for the details caused him to question. In fact, the question he asked was the *EXACT* same question Abraham asked when God made some BIG promises to him... *"How will I know?"* In other words, *"How can I be sure this will happen?"*

• This reaction caused Zechariah to suffer through his own period of silence that would last until the day his *"just-like-Elijah"* baby was born. The baby whose voice would not be silent but would cry out from the wilderness and make ready a people for the Lord. When this baby arrived, Zechariah would do just as Gabriel told him and give his baby the name John, which means *"Yahweh is gracious."*

• Isn't this exactly what we celebrate at Christmas? The GRACE of God - who loves so deeply that he is willing to go to *ANY LENGTH* to rescue his children, even if it means sending his own Son into our story to meet us where we are. That Son will come in the most humble of ways, but rather than offer up incense before the veil in the holy of holies, he will offer himself up on our behalf.

• **PRAY:** *God, you are the master storyteller, and you have created a beautiful tapestry of stories, weaving your glory and your grace throughout every page. Open our eyes this season to all the ways your grace is evident in our lives every single day! Amen.*