

• *Luke begins a year before Jesus' birth*

Luke goes a long way back in the records connected with Jesus' birth and starts his story with an event that took place about a year before Jesus was born.

God's sovereign preparation

God sovereignly began to prepare for the coming of His Son.

• *The time and place*

God began to move in the life of a few people in and around Jerusalem. It was the time of Herod the Great, who ruled over Israel between 40 BC and 4 BC. (The word 'Judea' in 1:5 refers not to the southern province of Judea, but to the whole land of the Jews, Israel.) Our story takes place round about 6 BC, a year before the birth of Jesus. (Jesus was not born in AD 1. There were some errors in the calculation of the years.) God was planning to bring a miracle-child to prepare the way for Jesus.

• *John's special birth*

Often when God is about to use someone in an important life-long ministry there is something special about his birth. Perhaps the child is conceived with difficulty (think of Isaac or Samuel), or there is a special message at the time of the birth (think of Jacob or Samson), or there will be a special deliverance from danger (as in Matthew 2:13–14). The birth of John the Baptist, the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, was announced by an angel.

God used a couple whose life had been a mixture of godliness and suffering

God used a couple whose life had been a mixture of godliness and suffering. Zacharias and Elizabeth were elderly, perhaps in their sixties. They were from the priestly family of Aaron in the tribe of Levi. They were righteous people ^{□1}, but had also been through the great distress of having no children ^{□2}. They had long before prayed for a child ^{□3} but had now given up hope. God uses those whose life has been a mixture of godliness and suffering. It seems that adversity and suffering have to come into our lives to drive us to God in a deeper way. One never meets a godly person without there having been some suffering in his or her life.

□1 1:6
□2 1:7
□3 1:13

An unexpected answer to prayer

God answered a prayer unexpectedly. Twice a year priests had to do their duty at the temple in Jerusalem and Zacharias' turn had come ^{□1}. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice one of the priests had to go inside the 'holy place' and offer incense. The privilege of offering incense was experienced only once in a lifetime. Among the candidates (those who had not offered incense before) lots were cast to decide which one should have the privilege ^{□2}.

□1 1:8
□2 1:9

• *Zacharias' privileged duty*

• *Incense in the 'holy place' – acceptable prayer*

All of the furniture inside the 'holy place' of the temple symbolised fellowship with God. The incense stood for the fact that God was symbolically providing prayer for us. Our prayers get mixed with His provision and are acceptable to Him.

• *An angel appears*

So here is Zacharias experiencing the once-in-a-lifetime event of offering up incense – a ceremony which speaks of the acceptability of our prayers to God. Suddenly an angel appears, standing at the very point of the symbolism which speaks of the acceptability of our prayers. The people are praying also ^{□1}. Will Zacharias think of the prayer that he might have a son? Actually his only reaction is to be

□1 1:10-11

afraid (1:12)!

▣² 1:12

• *Sinful fear*

How sad it is that sometimes when God is about to give us the greatest blessing of our life, we respond with fear! We all tend to be sinfully afraid of God. Of course there is a good and right 'fear of God' – an intense concern not to be chastised by Him. But there is also a sinful fear of God, an unwillingness to believe that He wants to be good and kind towards us. It is a fear that arises out of our feelings of guilt. When God appears in some way we tend to immediately think of our weaknesses and our past sinful ways. God sends an angel to give Zacharias the greatest answer to prayer ever in his life, but Zacharias responds with fear. Yet God is more gracious than Zacharias expected. The angel tells him his prayer for a child has been answered ^{▣¹} and goes on to give a prophecy of the birth of John the Baptist ^{▣²}. Zacharias, however, is sceptical. How can that prayer be answered now? He and his wife are too old ^{▣³}.

▣¹ 1:13

▣² 1:14-17

▣³ 1:18

• *A gracious message met with a sceptical response*

• *Unbelief*

But the angel protests ^{▣¹}. He is an angel. He stands day and night in the presence of God! But Zacharias wants to be sceptical. Sometimes we can get so unbelieving that if an angel were to appear to us we would start arguing! This is Gabriel, the same angel who appeared to Daniel and gave predictions about the kingdom of God ^{▣²}. Zacharias is questioning the possibility of the miraculous and is arguing with an angel. This shows us the great power of unbelief. Zacharias is a godly man and he has been asking God to do something wonderful for him. Now he is talking to an angel but still will not believe the prayer he prayed will be answered – even though the angel is standing next to the incense altar which speaks of the acceptability of our prayers!

▣¹ 1:19

▣² Daniel 8:16; 9:21

God does not like it when we are unready for prayer to be answered

God does not like it when we are unready for prayer to be answered. Zacharias is rebuked. He will be dumb and deaf (as 1:62 implies) until John is born ^{▣¹}.

▣¹ 1:20-22



It happened as the angel said. The couple went back home ^{▣¹}. Elizabeth became pregnant ^{▣²}. Zacharias' disabilities were not permanent. A day of rejoicing came eventually ^{▣³}. But it was enough to teach everyone who knew Zacharias that God wants us to be ready for the answer to our praying. If our prayer is sinful we stop praying. If God says 'No' we stop praying. Otherwise we go on believing that God's promises 'will be fulfilled in their proper time.'

▣¹ 1:23

▣² 1:24-25

▣³ 1:57-64

• *God's rebuke – a lesson taught*

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