

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Luke 1:5-20

Verses 5-7

In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest by the name of Zechariah of the division of Abijah, whose wife was a descendent of Aaron, called Elizabeth. Both were righteous in the sight of God, following all the commandments and regulations of the Lord in a faultless way. But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive and were well advanced in years.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were descendants of **Aaron**, the brother of Moses, who were from the tribe of Levi. Luke stresses **that both were righteous in the sight** ἐναντίον **of God**, explaining this by saying that **they followed all the commandments and regulations of the Lord faultlessly**. Luke may be given the reason why the Lord chose them because they were pious, devout believers who were committed to the keeping of God's covenant with his people.

God could have chose a younger priest and his wife but he chose a couple who were **without children**, Elizabeth literally **being barren, and were progressing into their senior years**, probably in their forties. While readers can sense the drama here, the message to them is this: God works in a hopeless situation to carry out his plans. In order show that his act of salvation for the world does not occur by human planning or by human effort and righteousness but by his grace.

Verses 8-10

Now it happened that when his division was on duty and he was ministering before God, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to burn incense. He went into the temple of the Lord while the whole multitude of people were praying outside at the hour of the incense offering.

Verses 11-17

An angel of the Lord appeared to him standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him there, he was shaken and seized with fear. The angel said to him, "Do not be afraid Zechariah because your earnest prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son to you and you will call him John. He will be a joy and a delight to you and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great before the Lord and will drink no wine or fermented liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb and will turn back many of the children of Israel to their God. He will go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the disobedient to the thinking of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Fear over a stranger in the sanctuary.

The angel came to the point of his visit: **Do not be afraid Zechariah because your earnest prayer has been heard**. The angel meant him no harm but was in the temple sanctuary to speak to him about his **petition** ὁρήσις. Zechariah may have long given up praying for a child given his later scepticism when the angel promised him one. God was picking up a long-gone wish of the couple, dreams that had completely faded. A son was not on Zechariah's mind.

A child was promised, its gender indicated and its name given. Zechariah was witnessing a number of miracles starting with the shock visit by an angel and ending with the role and purpose of John. His name **John**, means, God gives or God has given. However, since the angel gives him the name, the ownership of John belongs with the Lord. Some very touching promises are then announced: **He will be a joy and a delight to you and many will rejoice at his birth**. There will be great personal joy and satisfaction over the boy's development but the deepest **delight and joy** will come from his

divinely guided work and what God accomplishes through him and for **the many** who follow his progress.

Having come from the Lord and fulfilling his plan, John will **be great before the Lord**. His status is not of concern here but the power of God exercised through him. He will be God's instrument accomplishing the mighty deeds of the Lord. This statement is followed by the strange reference to **not drinking wine or fermented liquor**. Certainly, this would be a requirement of the Lord but it is more the promise that John will be a Nazirite (Nu 6:4), separated from his countrymen and consecrated to the Lord. John would later be known for his ascetic life (Matt 3:4).

His greatness was further elaborated on: **He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb**. Luke uses this expression often (1:41, 67; 2:25,26) and concerning Jesus in a special way (3:16,22; 4:1,14) and pointing to the ultimate gift of the Father (11:14; 12:12).

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Verses 18-20

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know this for certain because I am old and my wife is well advanced in age?" The angel replied to him, "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and have been sent to you to announce these things to you. Now look here, you will be dumb and not be able to speak until these things occur because you did not believe my words concerning these things, which will be fulfilled in their time.