

# A Declaration of Those Things Which Are Most Surely Believed Among Us

## An Expositional Study of **The Gospel According to Luke** **Chapter 1- Luke 1:8-17**

### 5 The Revelation of God Ends 400 Years of Silence

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November 16, 2008

#### **Luke 1:8-17**

We are continuing our verse by verse journey through the Story of Salvation that is called- The Gospel According to Luke. And this time of expository preaching is the highlight of our Lord's Day worship service- as we come before the Lord and He speaks to us through His Holy Word. This is just the fourth message in Luke and we are really breezing right through this Gospel because we are already at Chapter 1-verse 8.

Now there are so many things that are foundational in establishing our understanding of the four Gospels and of Luke- and I want to address them week by week. We must remember that the New Testament is the written Record of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ- and how that Work manifests itself in the world and for all eternity. So that is what the New Testament is about- it's the Story of Jesus. And in particular- the four Gospels- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John- tell the story of Jesus' Life from four different perspectives.

Now one thing is clear in all four of the Gospels and that is the presence of supernatural miracles. In fact, in the four Gospels- there are 35 or so miracles detailed for us. Some of them are miracles which involve a single individual; some of them are miracles which involve thousands and thousands of people. But the Gospels are filled with supernatural miracles. And there are about twenty miracles that Luke describes in his Gospel Account.

Now a miracle must be understood. A miracle by definition is an act or an event that is entirely supernatural. A miracle by definition is contrary to natural law. A miracle is explained only by Divine intervention. And it's very important for you to understand that. A

miracle is an act or event that is entirely supernatural. It cannot be explained by natural law or by human reason but only by Divine intervention. A miracle is when God Sovereignly halts the normal processes and intervenes supernaturally.

And let me take this a step further. If there is any possibility of a human explanation; if there is any possibility of a rational explanation; or an empirical or scientific explanation- then that event is not a miracle. And the reason that I say that is because all the miracles in the Bible had a purpose. Miracles are not common- they are very rare in the history of the world- even rare in Biblical history. And all miracles had but one purpose. Miracles were manifested in the sight of men in order to demonstrate that God Himself had intervened into a particular situation- so that God would receive Glory from it.

That's what miracles were for- to bring Glory to God- and that is why no miracle could ever have any human explanation or human source. A miracle is an event or an act which has no explanation other than that God has intervened to speak or act. There's no way to explain it by natural law and there's no way to explain it by human reason. Miracles are inexplicable by natural law and human thought. Thus, miracles do exactly what they were designed to do- they reveal that God has intervened- so that God can be glorified.

And all throughout human history- there was never a time where God performed more miracles and where God intervened so often and in so many ways than He did during the birth of Jesus Christ.

The greatest miracle in human history is the miracle of the Incarnation- God becoming Man- God supernaturally planting a seed in a virgin woman who brought forth a child who was 100% God and 100% Man at the same time in the same body without conflict or contradiction. In fact- the Incarnation was such an earth shaking event- they had to invent a word to describe it- incarnation- because God had never become Man before.

So the greatest miracle of all time is the Incarnation. And that one single miracle is the centerpiece miracle surrounded by many other miracles- many of which are described in the Gospel Records of the New Testament and certainly many which occurred but aren't in the Gospels. There were absolutely many other miracles that simply were not written down. The Apostle John said that so many things were

done by Jesus and so many things were said by Jesus that if they had all been written down- the world could not contain the books.

So when you come into the Record of the Gospels- whether you're reading Matthew, Mark, Luke or John- you won't get very far until to run right into a miracle. And as we go through the next few chapters of Luke- you are literally going to be finding yourself in the midst of miracle after miracle after miracle as God is constantly intervening- imposing His Divine Will on the earth.

But let's put this all in perspective. The truth is that miracles don't happen very often. That is part of why miracles are so wonderful- they are rare. All throughout history- time goes on and miracles don't happen very often. But there are some rare exceptions when miracles did happen. But they happened- not just anywhere and not everywhere- but in that narrow realm of redemptive history that involved the nation called Israel. And even in the life of Israel- that one small little Middle Eastern nation that God has chosen to be His people out of which He literally drew His Messiah- there are some miracles that occurred in the life of that little nation- but even those are very, very rare.

For example, as you read the history of the Old Testament- you're going to come to miracles when you come to Israel and Egypt. God miraculously brings plagues upon Egypt that causes them to want the Israelites to leave and head for the Promised Land. And then God miraculously parts the Red Sea so His people can walk across on dry land and then God miraculously brings the waters back together in order to drown the pursuing armies of Pharaoh.

There are miracles that follow the children of God in the wilderness- forty years of wandering where God provides manna from heaven and God provides water from a rock; where their clothes don't dry rot and where their shoes don't wear out and where none of them even gets sick.

And there are miracles that occur under the leadership of Moses. During his lifetime- both in Egypt and in the wilderness- Moses saw the miraculous. And that was a time when God was revealing Himself- God was founding His nation and drawing them out of captivity and taking them to the land and revealing Himself to them as the one true living God where miracles were performed. God attended his Revelations with miracles.

And there's another period in the Old Testament in which miracles occurred and that is in the prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha- two very special, unique, prophets of God. And attending their ministry as they spoke the Word of God were miracles.

But apart from the time of Moses and Israel's coming out of the land and the time of Elijah and Elisha, miracles were not normal at all. Miracles didn't happen hardly at all. On some rare occasions- God may have done something miraculous as in the case of Daniel, for example. And while Daniel's life is not by any means filled with miracles- there were a couple of very remarkable things in Daniel's life. One was the fact that he was in a lion's den and wasn't eaten by the lion. But that in itself may be more Providential than miraculous. But later on in the story of Daniel there is the wonderful story of the fiery furnace where the faithful are thrown into the fire and the fire doesn't burn them- now that is a miracle. But again- those are rare occasions. Miracles didn't normally happen- even in the Bible.

Miracles happen on rare occasions to those who belonged to that little nation Israel, in God's Redemptive history at special times when God was revealing His Truth to them.

But the last miracle of the Old Testament? Well the last time of miracles would have been Elijah and Elisha and that is 800 years before we find ourselves here with Zacharias in the Temple. 800 years and even God's people have not seen a miracle. That's a long time and apart from what happened in the life of Daniel- there really haven't been any miracles in all of Israel. There hasn't even been the appearance of an angel for at least 500 years.

We have the appearance of a heavenly visitor in the case of Zechariah, the appearance of a heavenly visitor in the fiery furnace in the case of the Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, but that's 500 years before this time that we are studying in Luke. And God hasn't spoken to anyone or revealed any new Revelation to anyone now for at least 400 years since Malachi finished his prophecy.

And now all of a sudden- we come to this time in history identified in verse 5 as the days of Herod the king- which would have been sometime between 37 B.C. to 4 B.C- 400 years since the last prophet; 500 years since the last appearance of a heavenly visitor; and 500 years at least since the last miraculous Act of God in the case of the friends of Daniel and 800 years since any great open miracle in the lives of the

two prophets, Elijah and Elisha. That is a lot of silence and a lot of darkness.

But now something sudden and dramatic happens. All of a sudden angels start to appear. And they appear in great frequency in rapid succession. And at the same time- God begins to speak again and to reveal His Word again and miracles begin to happen again.

And when all this begins to start- they come at a rate never before even imagined in the history of the world- far more miracles than at any other time. This is literally an explosion of the miraculous on this little piece of earth that we know today as the land of Israel. And all of this Heavenly activity is ushering in the greatest miracle that the world has ever seen as Almighty God is taking on human flesh and is becoming a Man.

This is THE most dramatic; THE most important; THE most special; THE most unique event in all of history and it is attended to with a great outpouring of angels and miracles. So we're going to expect as we go through the gospel of Luke to be engaging ourselves in the on-going study of God's Sovereign and miraculous Intervention into human history.

And we're not going to be able to apply scientific laws to all the things that are going to happen in the next few weeks. We're not going to be able to find rational explanations for everything that goes on as we get into the birth of Jesus because there is no reasonable or scientific explanation for the Incarnation of God in Christ. There is no reasonable explanation for the fact that He lived a perfect life and that He died a substitutionary death on the cross in which He paid the penalty for the sins of all who would ever believe. There's just no way to reasonably explain a physical, bodily, literal Resurrection from the dead. And there's no way to explain on an empirical level how Jesus could ascend into Heaven without the aid of a rocket as Jesus did

So we're going to see miracle after miracle after miracle in the next few weeks. And all of this attests to the fact that this is God Sovereignly imposing His Will into the lives and history of human beings.

So Luke is writing the Gospel of Jesus Christ- but it is really the Record of Divine intervention in human history. God Sovereignly and Supernaturally inserting Himself and He does it in ways the likes of which the world has never ever seen. 500 years since the last miracle;

800 years since the last time of miracles; 500 years since an angel appeared; and 400 years since God spoke- and now it all comes back in a volume and a quantity the likes of which it has never occurred before, nor since. God breaks His silence.

And because he is the ever careful historian- Luke understands the critical importance of assuring his readers that the story of Jesus is not just a human story. It's not a cultural myth. It's not a cultural legend. It's not a fantasy dreamed up by men. Luke wants us to understand clearly that the story of Jesus is the Revelation of the God of the Universe and therefore Luke goes into great detail about the Sovereign, supernatural and miraculous element of this Story that has absolutely no human explanation.

In fact, Luke begins this Story of Salvation with an angel suddenly appearing from heaven- the first in 500 years; The first Revelation from God in 400 years; the first individual miracle in 500 years; to be followed by the first season of miracles in 800 years. It all seems to come at once and Luke recorded it all for us.

The first miracle occurred as the first angel to appear in 500 years comes and speaks to little old insignificant Zacharias. And so this grand Story of Salvation begins with **Luke 1:5:**

**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.**

**6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**

**7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.**

**8 Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division,**

**9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.**

**10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.**

Now here it comes- look at verse 11:

**11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.**

**12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw *the angel*, and fear gripped him.**

**13 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.**

**14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.**

**15 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.**

**16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.**

**17 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.”**

Now you will remember from last time that Luke sets the timing in history for us in verse 5 by telling us that all of this happens “**in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea**”. And as we have already found out- Herod ruled from 37 B.C. to about 4 B.C. and so when you work the calendars out- Herod died about a year after the birth of Christ which occurred by our calendar adjustments in about 3 or 4 B.C. So this is all near the end of the reign of Herod.

And, you know, God is the God of small beginnings. God does things that are so understated. In fact, as you go through **The Gospel According to Luke** you kind of wait for some trumpets to blow or some brass section to show up and do a fanfare. But it never happens. The miracles are just matter of fact- they're just stated in very thoughtful and simple undertones. It's just very understated. It simply says in verse 11, “**And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.**” It doesn't say, “*Ta-da-ta-da...*” It doesn't say, “*And the earth shook and the Heaven rattled and fire came out of the sky and smoke and then an angel appeared.*” It doesn't say that at all. It's just an angel appeared. It's that understatement- that simplicity that makes the New Testament authors so very trustworthy and believable. They don't try to embellish it.

Luke doesn't say, *"Look- I know you're going to find this hard to believe, folks, but look, this is the way it was, like it or not, an angel of the Lord suddenly and dramatically appeared"* It doesn't say that. It doesn't have any need to build itself up or to add fantastic claims like so many self appointed people do today. It doesn't bear any of those pressures that somebody who is trying to sell a bill of goods might do. It doesn't have to do any of that because it is true. So it just very simply and matter of factly states that an angel appeared- the first one in over 500 years and then in verse 13- an angels talks with a man for the first time in 500 years and says- "You're going to have a child."

So we have an angel from Heaven and we now have a Word from God- because an angel doesn't ever speak his own mind or gives his own words- but he always speaks only the Word of God- and now we also have the Divine Promise of a miraculous birth of a son to two people who are at least 60 years old and could have been as old as 80- who have been barren since their marriage in their late teens.

So suddenly- after hundreds and hundreds of years- the Silence of Heaven is broken; an angel appears; and a miracle is about to happen.

Now center stage in this opening part of **Luke** is taken by a man named Zacharias. And as we have already found out- Zacharias is just a common man- he's just one of 18,000 priests who are serving the children of Israel- Luke says in verse 5 that Zacharias was a "certain priest." And I would think that if you could choose any adjective to describe yourself, the word, "certain" wouldn't be one of the most glowing descriptions you would give about yourself.

Luke could have said, "A wonderful priest" or "A noble priest" or "A brilliant priest," but instead he said, "a certain priest"- a very undistinguished guy- just one of many sons of Aaron. He was undistinguished in terms of social status- although he was certainly respected. But he was just a common faithful devout priest who married a daughter of a priest. And Zacharias' wife came from a family of priests- her father was a priest and her grandfather and perhaps her brothers and uncles if she had them- were all priests. Furthermore she was named Elizabeth- which means she was named in honor of Aaron's wife.

So this was a very devout family. Her background was priestly and his background was priestly. They were people who were devoted to the service of God.

And beyond their background- Luke shows us their character in verse 6. Luke says that they were both righteous in the sight of God and they walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. And we saw that last time that both Zacharias and Elizabeth understood what a lot of people don't understand today. They understood what Righteousness was and they knew how to get it. They knew that they could not develop their own personal righteousness by obeying the law but that the Righteousness that it took for them to go to Heaven came by Grace through Faith and not by works.

You see- Righteousness can be summarized in three concepts: Law, Grace through Faith; and Obedience. First of all- Righteousness is defined by Law. What is it to be right with God? It's defined by the Law. Read the Law of God- that is what defines Righteousness- do this; don't do that- that is what Righteousness is.

But while Righteousness is defined by Law- it is not realized by Law- it is realized by Grace through Faith. So what happens is that you see the Law- which defines Righteousness- and you try to obey it- but what happens? You fall short. And when you fall short of obeying the Law perfectly and continuously- you are not Righteous- but you are a transgressor of the Law. That is what it means to fall short. You fall short of being Righteous- which means you are unrighteous or not righteous.

So if every time you try to obey the Law- you fall short- how will you ever become Righteous? Righteousness is realized by Grace through Faith. Righteousness is not attained by our obedience- but it is imputed to us by Grace through Faith. So Righteousness is defined by Law- but since we can't keep the Law- we throw ourselves on the Mercy of God and trust in the finished Work of Jesus Christ- and by His Grace through the Faith that he gives us- Righteousness is imputed to us.

So Righteousness is defined by Law; then it is realized by Grace through Faith and finally- Righteousness is demonstrated by obedience. It is defined by Law; it is realized by Grace through Faith; and it is demonstrated by Obedience.

And both Zacharias and Elizabeth understood that. I can only pray that after 2,000 years- we would understand that as good as they did. And by the way- if you want to look at this from the negative standpoint- Legalism is Law without Grace. Legalism is Law without

Grace and Antinomianism or doing what is right in your own eyes is Grace without Law. So the very definition of self righteousness then is obedience to the *external* commands of the Law without the *internal* Power of Grace.

So this couple was not legalistic and they were not antinomian and they were not self-righteous. They revered the Law of God for its holy morality. They understood the Righteous standard that the Law taught and they knew that they fell short of attaining it. So they begged God for Mercy and they received Grace- and in response to the Grace that God mercifully gave them- they were obedient in the power of that Grace- not only internally but also externally to the depths of that Law.

And Luke makes a big point of this because he wants us to know that the New Testament is not in contrast with the Old- but the New is the fulfillment of the Old. The New is the story of the final and superior Sacrifice that provided the Righteousness that even Old Testament saints sought and received from God.

So we could say in terms of background- that everything was fine with this couple. In terms of spiritual life- everything was fine with this couple. But in terms of the natural- everything was not fine because verse 7 says they didn't have a child and that was something that was tragic because it bore a real bad stigma.

Many of the Jews of that day believed that if God cursed you- He would make you childless- and so barrenness was looked at as being a symbol of their supposed wickedness and their supposed sinfulness and they bore this social stigma of being barren and now they're in their 60's, 70's, 80's, whatever, and they still have no child and now there's no hope- except by the miraculous and miracles hadn't happened back then for over 500 years.

Now look at the second point- his priestly responsibility. And this gets fascinating- his priestly responsibility. Now as a priest there were 18,000 of them, 24 courses of the priests so each of them got to serve down at the temple two weeks a year...one week at one time a year and another week at another time. And they would go down and for a full week they would do their priestly duty which was mostly making sacrifices. They were butchers. That's what they did all day and were covered from head to toe with blood...slaughtering animal after animal after animal for those who came to make sacrifices.

So it was his time and it says in verse 8,

**Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division,**

So Zacharias was of the division of Abijah and you will remember that that was one of the grandsons of Aaron and there were 24 divisions of the priests, each named for one of the grandsons of Aaron- the sons of Ithamar and Eleazar, and Zacharias' particular order was the order of Abijah and it was Abijah's order's time to be in the Temple. And even under those orders they were divided into other orders and families. And so Zacharias' group was now serving in the Temple for that week and he was just doing his duty there.

And it was just a common thing that he was doing. The uncommon comes in verse 9-

**...he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.**

Now you've got to stop here because Luke is very understated in what he says here because you can't imagine what a thrill this was for Zacharias. I mean, there's no way to understand this unless you understand some background information.

You see, every day at the Temple in the morning and in the evening there was a burnt incense offering given to God. In the morning there was the sacrifice of the animal on the brazen altar- that was the sacrifice of the spotless lamb that was sacrificed in the morning and in the evening. And at the time of the sacrifice in the morning and the evening- there was also the offering of incense to God. So that was done in the morning and the evening.

But not every priest could do that. The priest was chosen to do that by lot. In other words, his name was drawn. And it was a very, very great honor if your name was drawn because many priests would never have their name drawn even one time throughout their whole lives. And no non-priest would ever be able to have this privilege and only some priests. And in order to spread it around- it could only happen one time in your entire life. If you had ever offered the burnt incense one time- you couldn't ever do it again.

So this was Zacharias' great moment. This is the pinnacle of his priestly service. Many priests would never have this privilege and of

those priests who did do it- they could only do it one time. So this one cat would have been the high point of Zacharias' whole life. It would bring him from the outer court of the Israelites- directly into the Holy Place.

And remember there was a court of the Gentiles and a court of the women, and then there was the inner court of the Israelites and then there was what's called the sanctuary or the temple which was divided into two parts, the first part called the holy place, then there was a curtain and behind that was the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was which symbolized the actual Presence of God. And no one could go in there ever except the high priest- once a year- on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat in atonement for the sins of the nation.

So, the priest and the people stayed outside the temple. Only one priest in a day could walk in there and offer that burnt incense and come right back out. This then would take Zacharias from the normal place where he was outside butchering animals by the altar, and it would take him into the holy place. He would be able to do this only once in his lifetime so the privilege was just enormous.

Now the Temple entrance faced east at the far end of the holy place, when you went in, and at the far west end as you went in was this incense altar. It was golden and it was for incense. It stood just barely outside the veil between the holy place and the Holy of Holies. To put it simply- it was as close to the literal Presence of God as any human could get except the high priest once a year going inside. This was as close as anyone could get. So this was the supreme honor. Remember that to the Jew- God was distant and so this was getting as near as you could get.

Now even though this golden incense altar stood outside the Holy of Holies- it is associated with the Holy of Holies. For example, in **Hebrews 9:3&4**- it associates the incense altar with the Holy of Holies. The reason for that is because on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies- he not only took blood from the sacrifice on the brazen altar- but he took incense from the incense altar with him and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat. So because the incense from this altar was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat once a year- it was associated with the Holy of Holies. So again- this is the holiest place that anyone could get but the high priest once a year.

Now here's what he would have done that day. Using some kind of utensil- Zacharias would have gathered coals off of the brazen altar of the burnt offering and he would place all these coals in a golden bowl. And somehow he would carry that golden bowl with those hot coals and he would go inside the holy place- having never been there in his whole life- and he would proceed through a place he'd never seen- to the far end where he would find the golden altar of incense.

There he would dump the coals and they would be spread around with some utensil. At that point he would put incense on top of those burning coals and immediately a huge column of smoke would rise up and it would carry both the smoke and the fragrance of that incense wafting everywhere around the temple. That was all his duty was and then he was to leave.

Now it was customary that the priest who was doing this didn't stay very long. You see, there was a tremendous fear as they got close to the curtain- close to the Holy of Holies- that they might do something to dishonor God- do something trivial- do something blasphemous and it was a dangerous place to be- almost as dangerous as going inside the Holy of Holies.

And according to Jewish writings that are not found in the Bible<sup>1</sup>- when the high priest did that- they put bells on his skirt so they could hear him moving around so they would know if God had killed him in there for some blasphemy. If the bells stopped ringing, they'd have to put something under and drag him out.

So it was a frightening thing, in one sense. He would then spread the coals; put down the fragrance; and the incense would rise up. The ascending aromatic cloud was symbolic of the prayers of God's people- symbolic for the prayers for Salvation; for repentance; prayers of confession; prayers of thanksgiving; prayers for the peace of Jerusalem; prayers for the coming of Messiah; prayers for blessing; prayers for family; prayers for the nation; prayers that the Savior would come and take away sin; prayers for the kingdom to come. All those things would be part of the praying of the people, and that's what was going on outside in verse 10- the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. They were actually doing what the incense symbolized. The incense symbolized their dependence

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Edersheim; *The Temple- It's Ministry and Services* (Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 1994)

on God, it symbolized their submission to God, it symbolized His sovereignty over them, it symbolized their dependence on Him. So as prayer was being symbolized with the incense- it was actually being carried out- outside.

Now this heightens the drama of the moment. The people are all praying and praying and praying and the incense is going up. And verse 11 says, and again in such understated tones,

### **And an angel of the Lord appeared to him...**

So now we go from Zacharias' personal righteousness; to his priestly responsibility; and now to his prophetic revelation. God has stepped in at this point. God has Sovereignly invaded history- He has imposed Himself onto Man. 800 years without miracles, 500 years since the fiery furnace in Daniel, 400 years since God spoke, 500 years since an angel had been there and suddenly an angel appears.

Zacharias was probably just about ready to leave- and suddenly- he sees an angel. No doubt- he had read Old Testament accounts about angels- how they appeared to the patriarchs in the book of Genesis; how they appeared to the prophets; how they assisted Israel. And he knew about the last apparent appearance of an angel in a vision to Zechariah the prophet nearly 500 years earlier.

But this wasn't like that. This wasn't a vision. This was an actual angel. Zacharias actually saw this angel standing to the right of the altar of incense.

Now what does that signify? Standing to the right of the altar of incense...what does that mean? I read some commentators on that. Some of them said, "Was standing to the right because the prayers of the people were right." "He was standing to the right because that's the side of blessing and that's the side of favor." And all the left-handed people go, "No." So what is the significance...he was standing to the right? Is there some great spiritual lesson about standing to the right?

I remember when I was being asked some Bible questions one time and there was a discussion about the symbolic furniture in the tabernacle. Somebody asked me the question, what is the significance, what is the primary purpose of the board in the back wall of the tabernacle? And I answered, "*To hold up the ceiling.*" I mean, really, you don't want to get too carried away with symbolism. The only point

that Luke is making here is that this angel was present in actual physical form so that he could be specifically located.

So this is not an apparition, this is not some foggy thing, this is not a dream or a vision- there was a real angel there and he was standing right over there to the right side of the altar of incense between the altar of incense and the candelabra, the golden candelabra that was right over on that side. Luke was simply identifying for us the reality of this angelic appearance.

God had invaded earth and sent His messenger and he was there and he was really there, and Luke knew exactly where he stood.

And what was Zacharias' reaction to this incredible, unheard of event? Read verse 12:

**Zacharias was troubled when he saw *the angel*, and fear gripped him.**

Was Zacharias happy? No. Did he jump around and dance and shout and laugh? No. The Bible says that he was "**troubled, ...and fear gripped him**". He was panicked. He thought he was going to die. He was flippant- he had never been as serious as he was at this moment because this just didn't happen. This was a perfectly holy, glorious being- this was an angel of the Lord that came right out of the Presence of God and was standing there looking at him!

Panic and trepidation and fear and soberness and reverence were the right response. A sinful man in the midst of a holy visitor from Heaven. The English says, "troubled"- the Greek word here is *tarasso*, and this verb means: *startled*. And then Luke says, "Fear gripped him" and that's an interesting Greek word- ateroxtha, and it means he was terrified. We have an English word that comes from that root, ataraxia, or ataraxic. Any of you in medicine might be familiar with that, that's a tranquilizer, an ataraxic, the alpha primitive negates the fear...negates the anxiety because taraxi means to be terrified- so an ataraxic takes away the terror.

So this is not calm- this is the opposite of being calm. He was terrified. But this was a normal reaction when people saw an angel.

It was the same reaction that Gideon had in **Judges 6** when a heavenly visitor confronted him. It was the same reaction of Mannoah the father of Samson in **Judges 13**. In fact he said to his wife, "*We're going to die. There's a visitor here from heaven and we're dead*". In

fact, the correct Hebrew translation of **Judges 13** is *"I saw the Lord and we're dead."* Sinners always feel the tremendous weight of their guilt in the presence of a holy visitor.

It was the exact same reaction of Isaiah when Isaiah saw God high and lifted up in **Isaiah 6** and heard the angels saying...holy, holy, holy- he immediately saw himself correctly as a wicked sinner.

It was the same reaction of Ezekiel the prophet in the first chapter of Ezekiel when he saw that almost indescribable presence of the glories of the throne of God, he says at the end of the chapter,

**Ezekiel 1:28**

**Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.**

It was the same reaction of Daniel in **Daniel 8** and in **Daniel 10** when Daniel was confronted with a heavenly visitor. It was traumatic, and it was terrifying.

The very same thing happened to Mary. If you look down in verse 29 in Luke 1. When the angel appeared to her she was greatly troubled at the angel's presence and at his statement. And he has to say to her in verse 30, "Don't be afraid, Mary." And the shepherds in the second chapter of Luke. "The angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were terribly frightened. And the angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid.'"

Whenever a perfectly holy visitor from the very Presence of God appears- terror is the appropriate response. The Apostles- when they saw the glorified Christ in **Matthew 17**- fell into a comma. John the Apostle when he saw the vision of the glorified Christ in **Revelation 1**, he says literally, *"I fell at His feet as a dead man."* It just knocked him out with fear. A holy visitor from the Presence of God shows up- abject terror strikes into the heart of Man.

And this brings to mind the silly dribble that you hear from people today who supposedly have conversations with angels. That they laugh and talk and eat with angels and one man wrote a book in the early 1970's and said that an angel came and played with his dog on the floor. Many today fall down while being prayed for by a nothing but other sinful human beings as though this is Power of God or as though the man is the same thing as an angel or Jesus. He isn't. This is just utter

nonsense- children playing Church- immature children acting like they have really had some kind of holy experience- because seeing a real angel is and always will be an utterly terrifying thing.

Luke, by the way, likes to talk about this fear- and so should we. He refers to it repeatedly throughout his Gospel. He makes note of the fact that it isn't cute or funny or cool or hip- but it's a frightening thing to encounter holiness from Heaven. And you'll see that in chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 5, chapter 7, chapter 8, you'll see it again in chapter 9 and then toward the end in chapter 23.

And this is a familiar greeting. Angels must have learned to say this because this is their standard greeting. "Don't be afraid," because whenever they show up- people panic. Whether you're going back to Genesis 15 or at Revelation 1, they have to say, "Don't be afraid." Heavenly visitors have to calm human fear.

And why not be afraid? Zacharias would have known very well what the others knew, that God is a great judge of sin. That when the holy God, or a holy angel appears- that sin is manifest- that sin is revealed- and being in the Presence of the holy paints the picture of one's own sinfulness clearer than ever before. And so the fear of judgment sets in.

But this isn't a judgment visit. On the contrary- this is a blessing. Look at what the angel said in verses **13-17**:

**13 ... “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.**

**14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.**

**15 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.**

**16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.**

**17 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.”**

"For thy petition (*prayer*) has been heard". What prayer? Some have suggested that Zacharias was praying for the salvation of Israel.

But it doesn't say that. Some have suggested that he was praying at that very moment for the Messiah. But it doesn't say that. Some say he was praying that the Savior would come- that the true lamb, the true sacrificial lamb would come. That's real nice- but it doesn't say that.

What was Zacharias praying that God heard and sent an angel to give him the answer? The very next statement of the angel tells you what it is,

**... for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.**

Now the way that the Greek is worded here shows us that this was a long-standing prayer- something that Zacharias had prayed about for a long time. Now it doesn't necessarily mean that he was praying for a son that day or even that very moment- but that he had been praying about it for a long time.

It is very possible that he may have already lost hope that it would ever come to pass. Thank God- that God didn't give up. Zacharias and his wife may have been so old that maybe it was very rare for them to ask God to give them a child anymore- maybe they didn't do it at all. But that was no doubt a common prayer for many days and years of their life. The prayer which maybe you started praying long ago and is still somewhere in the back of your mind has been answered and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.

I pray with my wife every night of my life- even when I am out of town- I call her up and we pray that my children and their wives and husbands will love and serve Jesus all the days of their life. I am blessed to have seen that.

So God hears the prayers of His people and God moves on those prayers and with that- the Story of Salvation is launched. God sends an angel. God speaks through that angel His Divine Revelation and God promises a miracle birth to this old faithful couple. And with that Sovereign intervention- the Story of Salvation begins. Lord willing- next Sunday I'm going to show you Zacharias' reaction and how he came to be deaf and dumb.

Let's come and pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.