

Zechariah Hears from God

Dozens of questions raced through Ayana's mind, and fear was chasing each one of them! How would they pay their mortgage, how would they get by? The room started to swirl.

"Sweetheart, lie down." It was the voice of her husband, Malik. He helped her from the kitchen stool and guided her to the sofa in the family room.

Malik had just told Ayana about losing his job due to severe cutbacks. He had hoped that as an executive, he would be spared any cutbacks. But the company said it made sense to "eliminate some of their big-ticket items."

Malik had initially been in a fog of despair, anger, and fear. However, 15 minutes into his 45-minute commute, he heard the voice of the Lord telling him he was not alone. Malik was reminded of the promises of God that he had seen come true in his life, time and time again.

"Ayana, God's got us," she heard Malik say, as he took her hands.

"Heavenly Father, we are going to be strong and courageous," prayed Malik. "We will not be afraid or discouraged, because we believe in You, and You have promised that You will be with us wherever we go and whatever happens. But we do need You now. So, in confidence, we are drawing near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen," Ayana exhaled, as she opened her eyes.

1. *What promises have you believed that came true and which have not?*

2. *Why is it important to be a "promise keeper"?*

3. *Describe a time when you wanted reassurance that God keeps His promises.*

An Angel Appears

Luke 1:8-12, KJV

8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

9 According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

Luke 1:8-12, NIV

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

Luke 1:5 tells us that Zechariah was a priest of the division of Abijah (one of the 24 divisions of priests caring for the temple). Zechariah was married to Elizabeth, who was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:36). Luke tells us that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in the eyes of God, but that Elizabeth had been unable to bear children for her entire life (Luke 1:6-7). It was commonly believed that barrenness was a sign of God's disfavor upon a woman. However, God also allowed barrenness to enhance a blessing He was going to impart such as with Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah, and Elizabeth.

Zechariah's duty on this day, as chosen by lot, was the burning of incense, which was a fragrant symbol of the prayers of God's people, rising up to heaven. Since the temple priest acted as a mediator between God's people and the Lord, the people gathered around the temple entrance

in order to participate in the ritual. They were not allowed inside the Most Holy Place; only a ceremonially clean priest was allowed. The people also had a role to play, however, and that was to offer up the prayers that were symbolized in the rising smoke of the altar's incense (see Rev. 8:3-4).

While Zechariah was performing his duties near the altar of incense, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and he was gripped with fear. It is inherently terrifying to be in the same room with a holy heavenly being who has been in the presence of God.

4. *What was Zechariah doing just before the angel of the Lord appeared to him?*

5. *What was Zechariah's emotional response to the appearance of God's messenger?*

A Joyful Announcement

Luke 1:13-17, KJV

13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

17 And he shall go before

Luke 1:13-17, NIV

¹³But 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. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and

him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

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.”

The angel, who we later learn is Gabriel, told Zechariah that the priest’s prayers had been heard. From the angel’s pronouncement, we can presume that Zechariah had been praying for the Lord to open Elizabeth’s womb.

Gabriel told Zechariah that Elizabeth was going to have a son, and they were to name him John. Of course, this baby became John the Baptist. The angel also described the future ministry of their baby. John would grow up to be fully-devoted to God, and once he began his prophetic ministry, many would see the hand of God upon this man.

His parents were to be sure that he was never to touch alcohol, because he would instead be filled with the Holy Spirit (even in the womb). By emphasizing the importance of deep and life-changing repentance, his eventual role would be to “pave the way” for the Messiah, so that the hearts of many people would be ready to receive Him. Gabriel stated that John would represent the spirit of Elijah and would announce the coming of God’s Messiah.

6. *What did Gabriel say was going to happen to Zechariah and Elizabeth?*

7. *What did the angel predict about the eventual mission of their son?*

Unhealthy Doubt

Luke 1:18-20, KJV

18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.
19 And the angel answering

Luke 1:18-20, NIV

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰And 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."

Zechariah was stunned to hear that God had granted his request, and the angel was surprised by Zechariah's lack of faith. Not only did the angel feel the need to identify himself (Gabriel), but he also reminded the old priest that he actually stood in the presence of God. And now, this faithful, blameless man had slipped into a state of doubt and had to be disciplined for his unbelief.

Gabriel told the priest that he would not be able to speak until the child was born. Everything happens in its appointed time, and the priest would not be able to communicate what he had heard from the angel until he was actually holding his miracle baby.

Contrast Zechariah's response to that of Mary when she received Gabriel's message about Jesus (Luke 1:29-38). Both announcements focused on an improbable conception and birth. And even though Mary was perplexed by the angel's message, she received it with grace and humility, and was commended by Gabriel.

When Zechariah's time of discipline was over and the Lord loosened his tongue, we will see that the old priest learned his lesson to not doubt the seemingly impossible.

8. *What caused Zechariah to doubt the angel's message?*

9. *What was Gabriel's response to Zechariah's disbelief?*

Listening for God's Promises

At the time the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, the priest was fulfilling his duty of burning incense in the temple, a symbol of the prayers of God's people. It makes sense that Zechariah himself also prayed during this time. The people of God gathered outside the temple to offer their own prayers to God and so participate in the work of God's kingdom. An angel may not personally bring us a message from God, but we can listen for God's promises by spending time in prayer with Him. This helps us learn to hear His voice through His Word.

The angel reassured Zechariah with the news that God had heard his prayers. This promise is true for all who follow God, as we read in many Scriptures (2 Chron. 7:14, Ps.17:6, 1 Pet. 3:12, 1 John 5:14-15, etc.). What God promised Zechariah seemed impossible, but God had a specific purpose in John's miraculous birth. When God speaks to us through His Word, other people, or in the quietness of our hearts with the Holy Spirit, we would be wise to seek His purpose. John's role was to prepare the people's hearts to receive the Messiah. God's promises lead people to Him, to worship Him and see His glory. We can be sure He will keep His promises that result in leading more people to trust in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Like Zechariah, we may doubt we've heard from God or that He will really keep His promises, even those we read in Scripture. We strengthen our faith best when we focus on God, not the situation or seemingly impossible circumstances. God will reassure us in the truth of His promises when we humbly accept His working in our lives.

10. *How might our prayers allow us to participate in the work of God's kingdom?*

11. *How can we listen for and hear God's promises?*

12. *What purpose(s) does God have in the promises He gives in Scripture?*

Living Out My Faith

This lesson describes God's promise to Zechariah, fulfilled later in the same chapter. The Bible contains many examples of God's promises and their fulfillment to show us we can absolutely trust Him to keep His Word. Through Zechariah and Mary's stories, we see God is pleased when we accept and believe His promises.

► *In light of God's faithfulness, what are you willing to promise God? Complete the sentence frame below or write it on an index card. As time allows, expand the sentence to write a prayer to God expressing belief and trust in His promises.*

► *Because I believe God's promise that He will _____, I promise to God that I will _____.*

KEY VERSE

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—Luke 1:13, KJV

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."
—Luke 1:13, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of December 5 through December 11

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Malachi 3:1-6—God's Messenger Is Coming.
- Tues.** Malachi 3:7-18—God Calls His People to Return.
- Wed.** Malachi 4:1-6—God's Prophet Is Coming.
- Thurs.** 2 Peter 1:16-21—God's Spirit Moves His Prophets.
- Fri.** Zechariah 12:1-10—God Will Preserve David's House.
- Sat.** Luke 1:57-66—God Opens Zechariah's Mouth.
- Sun.** Luke 1:67-80—Blessed Be the God of Israel.