

Zacharias
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An old man, said, whereby shall I know this? You believe not my words Zacharias, answered Gabriel, I was sent to speak these good tidings (Luke 1: 18-20 ASV portioned).

Zacharias was a priest. He belonged to the section of Abia. Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest. That meant for all ordinary purposes, there were far too many priests. They were divided into twenty-four sections (courses). Only at the Passover, at Pentecost, and at the Feast of Tabernacles did all the priests serve. For the rest of the year each course served one week twice a year. Priests who loved their work looked forward to that week of service above all things; it was the high-light of their lives. A priest might only marry a woman of absolutely pure Jewish lineage. It was specially meritorious to marry a woman who was also descendant of Aaron, as Elisabeth, the wife of Zacharias was. There were as many as twenty thousand priests and so there were not far short of a thousand in each section. Within the sections all duties were assigned by lot. Every morning and evening sacrifice was made for the whole nation. A burnt offering of a male lamb, one year old, without spot or blemish was offered, together with a meat offering of flour and oil and a drink offering of wine. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice incense was burned on the altar of incense so that, as it were, the sacrifices might go up to God wrapped in an envelope of sweet smelling incense. It was quite possible that many a priest would never have the privilege of burning incense all his life; but if the lot did fall on any priest that day was the greatest day of his life, the day he longed for and dreamed of. On this day the lot fell to Zacharias and very certainly he would be thrilled in the core of his being. But in Zacharias' life there was a tragedy. He and Elisabeth were childless. The Jewish Rabbis said that seven people were excommunicated from God and the list began; a Jew who had no wife or a Jew who has a wife and has no child. Childlessness was a valid ground for divorce.

Not unaturally Zacharias, even on this great day, was praying about it. Then the wonderous vision came and the message, even when hope was dead, a son would be born to him. The incense burned and the offering made in the inmost court of the Temple, the Court of Priests. While the sacrifice was being made the congregation thronged the next court, the Court of Israelites. The crowded congregation was praying at the actual time of incense burning, when the angel of the Lord appeared on the right side of the incense altar. When Zacharias saw him he was teribbly agitated and a sense of awe swept over him. But the angel spoke to him. Do not be afraid Zacharias; your prayers have been heard. Elisabeth your wife will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. This will be joy and delight to you and many more will be glad because he is born. He will be one of God's holy men; he will touch neither wine nor strong drink and will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of his birth. He will turn many of Israel's children to the Lord their God, He will go out before God in the spirit and power of Elijah to reconcile fathers and children and bring back the disobedient to the wisdom of good men and he will make a people fully ready for their Lord.

It was the privilege of the priest at the evening sacrifice to come to the rail between the two courts after the incense had been burned to bless the people. And the people marvelled that Zacharias was so long delayed. But when he came out and was unable to speak a word to them. He kept making signs, but not a sound came from his lips. They realized he had a vision in the Temple.

When his days of duty were over, he went back home, and soon afterward his wife Elisabeth became pregnant and kept herself secluded five months. How good the Lord is to me, she would say, now He has taken away my disgrace.

God's message came. Zacharias was waiting on God. Listen for God's voice. I pray you're not agitated or of too little faith when you hear it.