



Luke 1:11–15

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 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. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for 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.

Reflection

It is the moment of a lifetime. An experience he will cherish until his dying days. The adrenaline is flowing, time seems to slow, as he tries to take everything in and file it all away never to be forgotten. ‘What joy it will be re-live every moment with Elizabeth!’, Zechariah thinks as he stands in the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the Temple to a first century Jew. The

Temple dominated the Jerusalem skyline. It stood defiantly as the focal point of this subjugated people's nationalistic, cultural and religious zeal. Judaism was unthinkable without the Temple, and as long as the Temple held strong the Jewish nation held out hope of throwing off the yoke of their Roman oppressors. Because above all else, and all symbolism aside, the Temple was the place where God chose to dwell, the place where heaven and earth met, the terms upon which relationship was possible with the one true God. And if God was for them, they would prevail in the end.

Deep inside the Temple, in the Court of Priests, Zechariah's fellow priests prepare the sacrifice. Outside in the Court of Israel, a huge throng of faithful Jewish wor-

shippers are praying. Further out still in the Court of Gentiles converts to Judaism do the same. But today, there is no-one more honoured in all of Jerusalem than Zechariah. God has chosen him by lot, for the once-in-a-lifetime experience of leaving the Court of Priests and entering the innermost sanctum of the Temple, the Holy Place. The hairs on the back of his neck are standing on end, chills run up and down his spine, and nerves give way to exhilaration as he leaves his brothers, holds his breath, and enters the Holy Place.

He can barely take it all in as his eyes adjust to the darkness broken only by flickering candlelight. Before him rises the richly embroidered curtain that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The dividing curtain is resplendent with cher-

ubim woven in scarlet, blue, purple, and gold. Behind that curtain, hidden from all but the High Priest's sight (on the Day of Atonement and only once a year), the Ark of the Covenant, the Mercy Seat, the presence of God! To his left is the table of showbread. Directly in front of him is the horned golden altar of incense. To his right stands the golden candlestick all exactly as prescribed in the Scriptures. With the deepest of joy Zechariah purifies the altar and waits reverently for the signal to offer incense so that, as it were, the sacrifices would rise up to God wrapped in the sweet incense of prayer.

Moments later, in the dim candlelit room the fragrant incense curls upward. All anxiousness has passed. Deep joy floods Zechariah as he fulfils his duty in this life

defining religious experience.

And then his heart stops beating in his chest. Today's passage, Luke 1:11–15,

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 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. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for 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.

Angels are warrior messengers sent from God. They are blindingly bright. In the Old Testament just one of them slayed 185,000 people in one night (2 Kings 19:35). Almost exclusively when they appear in the Bible people fall to the ground as though dead, and invariably an angel's first words are always, verse 13,

Do not be afraid,

... as if this were somehow possible with their warlike, supernatural presence. And Zechariah is in the Holy of Holies. With conceivably God himself standing behind that curtain. It is a wonder he didn't die of a heart-attack right on the spot.

And then the impossible words began to flow that would indelibly mark his soul. From our passage,

Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for 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.

Zechariah; Your prayer has been heard.

The prayer the angel is referring to is Zechariah's prayer at the altar, the prayer of every devout Jew, the prayer for the redemption of Israel. It was a prayer for the coming of the Messiah. The Christ. The Promised One. The Chosen One. God's anointed king who would redeem God's people and rule on the throne in Jerusalem forever. But Zechariah, never in his wildest dreams or prayers would have expected the words that were to follow.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,

Luke said to Theophilus that he would investigate everything from the beginning. And here is the beginning. Our unimaginably wise, loving and merciful God begins his salvation of the world by answer-

ing the anguished lifelong prayers of this faithful couple who are unable to conceive a child. God's perfect plan is for the salvation of our whole world made up of individual people like these. And as only he could design, the removal of the disgrace of our world would begin with the removal of theirs. The reversal of our world's barrenness would begin with the reversal of theirs. From Elizabeth's womb would come John the Baptist who would prepare the way for the Saviour of the world.

Think

Please take some time now to stop and think deeply over what this passage reveals to us about the character of God. Who but our great and loving God would choose to save the world beginning by an-

swering the prayers of a childless couple? Can you see how God bends to answer the prayers of those who love and obey him? Doesn't it excite you that his plan that has been in motion since before the beginning of time catches up the heart-aching prayers and petitions of a single human couple and so perfectly answers them beyond their wildest imagining? Your life too is a part of this same majestic plan. And just like Zechariah and Elizabeth our Lord bends to incorporate your prayers into his plan of salvation.

Pray

With this in mind pray to our loving and merciful God today. Pray like Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed. Petition our Lord for a loved one who is lost. For someone you

care about who is sick or in need. For a besetting sin that you feel you just cannot shake. Pray like Zechariah and Elizabeth and then go out about your day today just as they would, honouring God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. And then wait on our Lord.