

# A COUPLE WHO COULDN'T HAVE CHILDREN DID

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By Pastor Stan

Luke 1:5-25

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## **INTRO.**

-- There's a scene in the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life* where it's Christmas time and the central character, George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is so hopeless that he goes to a bridge with the intention of jumping into the frigid waters and ending his life.

The Christmas season, which is supposed to be a time of joy, can actually be a time of sadness for many. That's especially true this year with all of the troubles produced by the COVID pandemic. If you, like George Bailey, find yourself sad and even despondent, then I believe that God has arranged for you to hear today's story. In the movie God sent an angel named Clarence to help George to see that "it's a wonderful life." Well, God may not have sent an angel to you (at least one that you saw), but I believe God has worked to have you here today or watching at home because He has something important to say to you from today's story.

-- I'm calling this year's Christmas sermon series "Christmas Miracles." Each week we're looking at a miracle that God performed to make Christmas a reality. Today, we're going to look at the first miracle in Luke's account of the Christmas story. Last week we looked at the prophecies about a Savior made throughout the OT. When God was ready to fulfill those long-awaited promises, He sent an angel, not Clarence but Gabriel to announce the arrival of a great event. But Gabriel's first Christmas announcement was not to Mary or Joseph but to a man named Zechariah, and that's where Luke begins his account of the Christmas story, with the angel Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah.

## **I. The Story's Characters: Zechariah & Elizabeth (vv. 5-7)**

-- In verses 5-7 Luke introduces us to the two main characters, at least, the two main human characters.

**vv. 5-7**, In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

### **A. The Central Character**

1. The central character in the story is a man named Zechariah, a name that means "God remembers." The reality is, however, that Zechariah had reasons to believe that God had forgotten.

2. To begin with, Zechariah lived during the time when Herod was king of Judea. This was "Herod the Great," who ruled Judea from 37 to 4 B.C. Although he's called a king, Herod was a vassal king, appointed by and subservient to the Roman emperor. Herod had tried to appease the Jews by building a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem, but his reign was a time of spiritual darkness. Herod was a cruel and wicked man who filled the country with the sinful debaucheries of Roman culture. The religious leaders were corrupt, and the last prophet sent by God was Malachi, more than 400 years earlier.

3. Not only did it seem that God had forgotten Israel, He also appeared to have forgotten Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Although they were a sincere, godly couple, they had come to old age without ever having children because Elizabeth was infertile, and in that society barrenness carried a shameful stigma. Children were considered a blessing from God; conversely, a couple unable to have children were wrongly looked upon as being punished or cursed by God for some reason.

### **B. His Identity**

-- Luke gives us an important fact about Zechariah's identity: Zechariah was a priest, descendant of Moses' brother Aaron, and it's that aspect of Zechariah's identity that figures into the rest of Luke's story.

## II. The Choosing of Zechariah (vv. 8-10)

**vv. 8-10**, Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

### A. The Priests in That Time

-- There were about 20,000 priests in Zechariah's time. They were organized in 24 divisions, and each division performed a week of Temple duty twice a year, which meant that there were hundreds of priests on duty at any given time. The vast majority of those priests performed their duties in the courts surrounding the Temple. Entering the Temple itself was restricted to a handful of priests who were chosen to perform specific tasks.

### B. The Greatest Privilege

-- Probably, the greatest privilege granted to an ordinary priest like Zechariah would have been the opportunity to enter the Temple and offer incense during either the morning or the evening time of prayer. That privilege was determined by "casting lots," something like drawing names out of a hat. Since there were so many priests, any given priest was allowed to perform that holy task only once, and many priests never had the opportunity to do it.

### C. Zechariah Chosen

-- By the time of this story, Zechariah was elderly, likely in his 60s or 70s. You can imagine how surprised and excited he was when his name was drawn to offer the incense.

His heart must have pounded with joy and anticipation as he dressed in the priestly robes, removed his sandals, reverently took the incense, and entered the Holy Place of the Temple as the other priests remained on the outside to pray. Imagine his awe as he stood in that mysterious glow of candles burning on the menorah, the golden candlestick. Think of his breathless excitement as he slowly made his way to the altar of incense in front of the great curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant resided. Think of the varied emotions that swirled within him as he poured the incense on the perpetually burning altar and prayed, "Lord, hear the prayers of Thy people, and let them come Thee like this incense," all while the priests outside the Temple were praying for the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah.

Zechariah must have often dreamed of and imagined what this moment would be like. But even in his wildest dreams he never could have anticipated what was about to happen next.

## III. The Appearance of Gabriel (vv. 11-17)

**vv. 11-17**, And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

### A. Zechariah Terrified

1. The sudden appearance of an angel at the altar must have terrified Zechariah. After all, it was well-known that two of Aaron's sons had been struck dead at that altar for offering the incense in an improper manner. The first thought to cross Zechariah's mind may have been if he also was going to be killed.

2. If so, Gabriel immediately put Zechariah's mind at ease.

**v. 13a**, But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard

### B. What Prayer

-- What prayer was Gabriel referring to? There are two possibilities:

### 1. Zechariah & Elizabeth's Prayer

-- Gabriel could have meant Zechariah's and Elizabeth's prayer for a child. The elderly couple had prayed for a child throughout most of their marriage, but that request had never been granted. Now, they were old and well past childbearing age and had probably not made that prayer for several years. They had long ago given up the hope of ever having a child.

### 2. Zechariah & the Priests' Prayer

-- Another possibility is that Gabriel was referring to the prayer for a Messiah that had just been made by Zechariah and all the other priests kneeling outside the Temple during the offering up of the incense. That daily prayer called on God to fulfill His promise to send the Messiah, the Savior who would destroy the power of sin and evil and establish the rule of God's kingdom.

### 3. Both

-- In actuality, God was about to answer both prayers: Elizabeth was going to have a son, and that son was going to be the forerunner of the Messiah, something prophesied by Malachi 400 years earlier, in the last two verses of the OT.

**Malachi 4:5-6** Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

-- The announcement that God was about to fulfill this great promise and was going to use Zechariah and Elizabeth as the means of that fulfillment should have filled Zechariah with uncontainable excitement. Instead, he responded very differently.

## IV. Zechariah's Response (vv. 18-23)

**vv. 18-23**, And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." 21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. 23 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

### A. Zechariah's Response

-- Zechariah responded with uncertainty and doubt and even asked how he could believe what Gabriel had just said.

### B. Gabriel's Rebuke

-- Here's a suggestion: if God ever sends Gabriel to tell you something, don't respond by asking if you can really trust him. Gabriel responds to Zechariah with an impatient rebuke.

-- "Do you understand who I am? I'm Gabriel. I stand in the very presence of God. I was sent here by God to give you this message. In order for you to think about what you just said and what you should have said, you won't be able to speak until the son God has just promised is born."

-- And sure enough, Zechariah went out of the Temple, unable to speak, but not unable to "perform." Elizabeth, who had been infertile all her life and was at the age when even the most fertile of women couldn't have children, barren Elizabeth got pregnant by her "old man."

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Zechariah's Story

-- When Gabriel told Zechariah he was going to have a son, Zechariah was familiar with the story of Abraham and Sarah and how God had enabled them to have a son when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. But Zechariah did the same thing we do - think that God performed miracles way back then but isn't doing things like that now.

### 2. K. Kingsbury Story

-- However, as Karen Kingsbury demonstrates in her book "A Treasury of Christmas Miracles," God continues to do miracles, even today. Each week I'm concluding my sermon with one of the true stories from her book.

Today's story is about Steve and Katy Anderson from Billings, Montana. It was a month before Christmas, and Katy's mother was in Des Moines, Iowa, with terminal cancer. Although Steve and Katy had recently married and this would be their first Christmas together, the couple decided that Katy should go to care for her mother.

Steve had asked their church to pray for them and to pray that there might be a way for them to be together for Christmas. Three days before Christmas Steve got a call from a member of the church who owned a small plane and offered to fly Steve to Iowa.

The next morning they went to the airport. It was a beautiful day - sunny and clear without any trace of bad weather. But as they reached the midpoint of their flight, they encountered thick fog. They had zero visibility, and then at the worst possible time the plane's radio and instruments went dead. Fearing that he would never see his wife again, Steve began to pray, "Please, God, help us. Please, take us through this safely."

Steve had barely spoken his prayer when an opening appeared in the fog, and they caught a glimpse of the Pierre Airport. They landed safely and found that the plane had a burned out fuse that had caused the problems with the radio and instruments.

By the time they were ready to take off, the skies had cleared and the sun had come out.

"Thank you, God," Steve prayed, "for keeping us safe. Please keep us safe the rest of the way."

As they passed over the mountain ranges, they once again encountered heavy fog. Soon the sun had gone down and everything was completely dark. Fortunately, the destination airport wasn't far away. Steve's pilot friend, Joe, radioed the airport control tower.

"We're closed because of the fog," the airport controller replied. "You need to return to Pierre and land there."

"But that's too far away," Joe answered. "We don't have enough fuel to go back there."

Both Joe and Steve were fearful, and once again Steve prayed, "God, please get us out of these clouds safely, and let us be with our families for Christmas."

Suddenly, there was a different voice on the radio.

"Okay. We'll get the ground crew ready," the voice said calmly. "Come in for an emergency landing."

Although they couldn't see anything, Joe guessed they were near the airport and began his descent.

Suddenly, the voice of the second controller came across the radio saying, "Pull it up! Pull it up!"

Joe pulled up just in time to see that they weren't over the airport but over a highway and had narrowly missed hitting an overpass.

Then the controller spoke again, "Listen to me, and I'll get you down." He continued giving directions, "Come down a little&hellip;a little more&hellip; to the right&hellip;straighten it&hellip;raise a little&hellip;left&hellip;lower&hellip;you're approaching the end of the runway&hellip;set her down now."

Just before the plane touched down, they saw the runway lights and touched down safely.

Steve and Joe looked at one another with great relief, and Steve prayed, "Thank you, God."

Joe radioed the control tower. "Thanks for guiding us down," he said. "We couldn't have made it without your help."

There was a pause, and then a different voice, the voice of the first controller, replied, "What are you talking about?" the controller asked. "We lost all radio contact with you after I told you to go to Pierre."

"You what?" Joe asked.

"We never talked to you or heard anything from you after that. We were stunned to see you break through the clouds and fog right over the runway. It was a perfect landing."

Steve and Joe looked at one another in total amazement. Who had been speaking to them? Whose voice had guided them and saved their lives?

If you ask Steve those questions, here's what he would say, "I believe that God protected us and perhaps he allowed an angel to guide us to the ground safely&hellip;God sustained me through that night, just as He continues to do every day of my life."