

Zecharias the Priest

Our readings for today bring us to a consideration of the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptizer. Being of a Levitical family, his father Zecharias was a priest who ministered in the temple according to the divisions laid down many years before by king David. He, we learn, was of the course of Abijah, referred to as Abia in the New Testament. We learn more about this in 1 Chronicles 24:10, speaking of the courses that the priestly families would follow: “The seventh to Hakkoz, *the eighth to Abijah*, the ninth to Jeshuah ...” (1 Chron. 24:10). It is interesting to consider the meaning of some of the names here. Zacharias means “*Yahweh hath remembered*”, and Abia means “*Yahweh is Father*”. We see the appropriateness: Yahweh had *remembered* his Holy Covenant (see Luke 1:72), and as a Father, was to send his son. In 1 Chronicles 24, cited above, we see that the next priestly division to follow Zechariah was “*Jeshua*” – the Hebrew equivalent to the Greek “*Jesus*”! So, just as the ministration of Zechariah, of the course of Abiah was to be replaced by the course of Jeshua, so the ministration of his son John the Baptist would prepare the way for, and be replaced by the ministration of Jesus the Christ.

The appropriateness of the given names continues. John means “*Yahweh is Gracious*”, and the name of his mother Elizabeth means the “*oath of El*”, with El being one of the titles of our heavenly Father. So we see that in Yahweh’s remembrance of “*the Oath*” made to the fathers of old (see Luke 1:73) according to his Grace and Mercy, his Son would be sent at the appointed time. And it was of the grace of Yahweh that Zecharias and Elizabeth would be granted a son, one who would be sent forth to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

This is evidently something that they prayed about, for whilst conducting his priestly duties, an angel appeared on the right hand side of the altar of incense and “said unto him, Fear not, Zecharias: *for thy prayer is heard*; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son” (Lu. 1:13). The emphasis on prayer in this chapter is evident: the time of these events was when “the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense” Incense itself represented prayer, as the Psalmist spake “let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Psa. 141:2). Even so, the angel came in answer to prayer.

The work of offering the daily incense was of great importance, which could only be conducted by those chosen by God: we are told that Zecharias was chosen by the casting of lots; the means of Divine selection in Scripture. 2nd Chronicles 26 records the occasion when a king, lifted up with pride, endeavoured to enter the Temple to offer his incense, when he had no authority to do so. Speaking of Uzziah, we read:

“when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against Yahweh his God, and went into the temple of Yahweh to burn incense upon the altar of incense” (2 Chron. 26:16).

The priests withstood the king, and said to him:

“It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto Yahweh, but to the priests, the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of

the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from Yahweh Elohim” (2 Chron. 26:18).

But the rebellious king refused, and so was stricken with leprosy in his forehead, and dwelt as a leper until the day of his death.

By contrast to Uzziah who sought to enter as his own high priest, we read of the Lord Jesus Christ:

“no man taketh this honour to himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him: Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec ...” (Heb. 5:4-5).

It is most significant to note that the year that Uzziah died, was the time when Isaiah saw a vision of Christ exalted on his kingly throne within the Temple of God (see Isa. 6).

Like some of the faithful families of old, Elizabeth was barren, unable to conceive a child: “and they both were now well stricken in years”. In these things, we find a parallel with Abraham and Sarah of the Old Testament. The angel was sent with the news that “... I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son”. Like Zecharias and Elizabeth, Abraham and Sarah, we read, “were old and well stricken in age”. But Abraham never doubted the ability of God to perform that which He has promised:

“Being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief: but was strong in faith, giving glory to God:” (Rom. 4:19-20)

And of Sarah also, after an initial faltering in belief, we read:

“Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised” (Heb. 11:11).

Zecharias was promised: “thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John” (Lu. 1:13). By contrast to Abraham however, he did not believe the promise, but said: “Whereby shall I know this, for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years” (Lu. 1:18). Unlike Abraham, he did consider his own body now dead, and the deadness of Elizabeth’s womb. But his voice of unbelief was to be silenced for a season, as Gabriel said: “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” (Lu. 1:20). Zecharias was silenced, as a sign of his unbelief.

In these things, we have a contrast with John the Baptist and his role. John was the “voice in the wilderness”, crying out the message of salvation. So the prophet Isaiah spake:

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of Yahweh, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ...”

And the message of “the voice” was thus:

“The voice said Cry. And he said: What shall I cry? *All flesh is grass*, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of Yahweh bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever*” (Isa. 40:3-8)

By contrast to Zecharias, Elizabeth “spake out *with a loud voice*” of joy at the appearance of Mary, pregnant with our Lord in her womb.

Ordinarily, there would be a blessing spoken by the priest at this time, as recorded in Numbers chapter 6:

“Yahweh bless thee, and keep thee: Yahweh make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: Yahweh lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (Num. 6:24-26).

But being unable to speak, these words were unable to be voiced, and the benediction would not have been made. “The people waited for Zecharias”, presumably to receive the blessing, but he was unable to give it. Zecharias would have had to continue the rest of the days of his ministration in silence.

One of the themes associated with John the Baptist, and Messiah himself, is the way in which men and women who would naturally be of low degree become exalted in the purpose of God. So, Mary in celebrating her conception of the Messiah spake of Yahweh:

“He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, *and exalted them of low degree* ...” (Lu. 1:51-52).

Notice the use of the plural term here: “he hath ...exalted *them* of low degree” – that is, both Elizabeth and Mary; both elevated in the purpose of God, but naturally of low estate, amongst the poor in society.

What is particularly interesting, is to see how some of the other inspired writers deal with this same theme, with allusions to the message of John. So James wrote:

“let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: but the rich in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away ...” (Jas. 1:10).

Notice the reference to the flower of the grass passing away. Again, Peter writes of this aspect, when speaking of the spiritual rebirth which marks the beginning of a person's walk in the Truth:

“... being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: ***But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.*** And this is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you” (1 Pet. 1:23-25).

Notice, the central theme of this citation is to demonstrate the incorruptible nature of the Word, coming from the Voice of God. The natural man shall pass away, but those who have assimilated the incorruptible Word shall themselves be made incorruptible, with the Lord Jesus.

Turning back to Zecharias and his inability to speak, we find that on the day of his child's circumcision, he named him “John,” whereupon: “his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God” (Lu. 1:64). What a contrast we have with the previous words of unbelief that Zecharias spoke! Immediately upon receiving his speech once more, he “spake and praised God”! His prayer had been answered, the promise had been fulfilled, and the Grace of God had been shown before all.

In these things, we have many points of exhortation and encouragement for ourselves. Although Zecharias had prayed before the Almighty, when the Angel came to answer that prayer, he didn't believe it to be so! We must believe in the power of prayer, in our own lives, that although the answer might not always be what we are seeking, prayer is heard and answered. We must have the faith of Abraham and Sarah, in looking for the promised seed, knowing that he will return soon. And most importantly, we must try to discern the Voice and his teaching that all flesh is as grass that withereth - and that our only hope of salvation is to assimilate as much of that word as we can. Let us then attend to the Word, trust in its fulfillment, and patiently wait for the coming of our Lord. Just as the people waited outside to receive the words of blessing from the priest upon his return, even so we must wait patiently for our Great High Priest to emerge, with blessings for us, to be with us throughout the ages to come.

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