

Promise of John's Birth
Luke 1:1-25

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

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. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 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." And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 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. 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." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 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. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."
(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- In Luke's day the more sophisticated writers would often introduce their books with a piece of stylish prose written in the classical style. Luke's introduction here is superb in this regard.
- Disciples of rabbis passed down traditions carefully, and oral storytellers were adept at passing on stories accurately. Luke writes while eyewitnesses are alive, so his accounts are reliable.

- Theophilus, was a common Jewish name. “Most excellent” could literally mark him as a member of a high class in Roman society, although Luke may use the title only as a courtesy.

- To be childless was economically and socially disastrous, because parents had no other support in their old age, and because, in the law, infertility was often viewed as a judgment for sin. Most assumed that barrenness was a defect of the wife. “Aged” suggests they were over 60.

- Incense offerings (Exodus 30:7-8) had been standard in ancient Near Eastern temples, perhaps to quench the stench of burning flesh from the sacrifices in the closed buildings. This offering in the temple preceded the morning sacrifice and followed the evening sacrifice. It is said that the officer who ministered regularly in the temple signaled the time to begin the offering, and then withdrew; the priest cast incense on this altar, prostrated himself and then withdrew quickly.

- Like Zechariah here, Abraham (Genesis 15:8; 17:17), Gideon (Judges 6:17, 36-40; 7:10-11) and others in the Old Testament (2 Kings 20:8; Isaiah 7:10-14) asked for signs in the face of astounding promises, but they were not punished. That Zechariah’s sign should be harsher to him (1:20) suggests only that this revelation is much greater than those which preceded it.

- Judaism had developed a long list of angelic names, but just two appear in the Old Testament: Gabriel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21) and Michael (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1).

Questions:

- + What is necessary for you to believe that someone’s story or narrative of events is true?
Do you believe that the narrative presented by Luke to Theophilus is true? Why or why not?
- + If infertility was attributed to sin, how is it that Zechariah and Elizabeth are called “righteous?”
How do you think they handled the stigma? Were you ever stigmatized by others unjustly?
If so, how did you handle it? How would God have you handle unjust treatment in the future?
- + If an angel of the Lord spoke God’s word directly to Zechariah, how could he have doubted?
Have you ever doubted God’s word? If so, why did you doubt, and does that doubt remain?
What must happen for you to doubt God less and trust him more?