

## Wake up and Smell the Incense

### A Lay Commentary on Luke 1:5-25

by Gary C. Burger, Mdiv.

#### Introduction

We often read the first two chapters of Luke during the Christmas season, and the reason I decided to study and comment on these chapters in October 2006 was to prepare my family, my church and myself for that upcoming Christmas. You see, every Christmas I feel ashamed that I did not use the season and Christmas day to enhance my walk with Christ in a proactive way. Each year, I grow increasingly annoyed by the sentimental veneer that covers everything like glittery tinsel and leaves me feeling as empty as a plastic Santa Claus. I determined to not make the same mistake this year. So one of my goals is simply to help you and me and our families connect with the Jesus who broke into our dimension from heaven nearly 2000 years ago. I invite you to participate in this goal. I believe Luke and Matthew had this same goal in mind when they wrote their Gospels. These two Gospels tell us about Jesus' birth. We quote these sources in our Christmas carols, cards and sermons. From these we build our Christmas plays, musicals and nativity scenes.

Luke strove to lay down the best and most accurate recounting of the life of Jesus Christ he possibly could. He describes that process in chapter 1 verses 1 through 4. We are going to begin today with verses 5 through 25.

#### Overview of plot

Any writer of history has to make tough decisions about what to include and what not include. If Luke tried to include everything that Jesus said and did as well as all the thousands of encounters He had with people, his Gospel would require many volumes of books. Therefore, he had to word and organize his content in a careful and deliberate manner. In order to make his Gospel accurate yet readable Luke put much of his content into mini-stories. He wrote each story using the structure, plot and other literary devices that would aid his goal of presenting an accurate report about Jesus. Many lay readers (and scholars) are not aware of these aspects and how they can help us understand what Luke was really trying to say. This is important because when we fail to correctly understand what a biblical author means, then we can wind up believing things about Jesus and doctrines that are not right. In addition, we want to make sure we apply lessons from the passage correctly. Correct applications come from a correct understanding of the author's text.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty details of this story let me just summarize the plot. Luke begins by setting the event in its time in history, and then he introduces the main characters: a priest by the name of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. After describing them as upright before

God and observing all the commandments and regulations, he reveals the complication in their lives and in the story. They have no children and she past her childbearing years. Zechariah is on duty at the Temple in Jerusalem, and when he goes inside to burn the incense offering an angel greets him. The angel tells him that Elizabeth will bear a son and that this son will be a great messenger who will prepare the people of Israel for the coming Messiah. Because Zechariah doubts the angel is telling the truth, the angel makes him unable to speak. The climax of the story occurs when He goes home and Elizabeth gets pregnant. The resolution of the complication happens when Elizabeth rejoices in what God has done to eliminate the social disgrace of not having a son.

When I read this passage the wheels in my head start turning and all kinds of questions pop out.

Questions like:

These priests appear from time to time in the Bible stories therefore they must be important. What exactly do they do when they priest? A manager manages, an administrator administrates, so can I say that a priest priests? and when he does what does he do?

Sometimes the names of main characters in Bible stories mean something. Did these names mean anything special?

What was the Temple like?

Why did he go inside to burn incense?

How did Gabriel know Zechariah's question was motivated by doubt?

What is all this about someone who would turn Israel back to God and prepare them for the Lord?

Why were they supposed to name their son John and not Zechariah, Jr?

Did Zechariah do any better job communicating his vision to the people than I would do?

Some more significant questions are:

Why should I care about this story?

Why should I care about Zechariah, Elizabeth and John the Baptist?

Is there something I ought to do, or say, or think about differently because of their examples?

Why did this story wind up in the most important book of all time?

Can I believe it is a true story when there is an angel and a miraculous conception involved?

We won't be able to answer all these questions or else this commentary would grow to the size of a football field. However, I think we'll be able to answer the crucial questions.

The word Messiah is going to come up a lot and so I want to begin by defining that word.

Centuries before Jesus was born God let his people, the Jews, know that He would send a man that He Himself would anoint for the task of reigning forever over Israel as an ultimately perfect king and offering salvation to all of humanity. That is what Messiah means. So this Messiah would be a specially "Anointed One." That is what the messiah means, "anointed one." Actually, it means "smeared one" because the ceremony involved smearing oil on the person to symbolize the Holy Spirit's coming onto that person. In OT times, just about anyone could be anointed.

They anointed priests to do their job of sacrificing animals to God for the forgiveness of people's

sins. They anointed kings for their job of ruling and judging. They anointed artisans to do their jobs of building the temple, and so on. All of these were little messiahs with little m's--anointed ones. They were set apart to do God's special assignments. Above all of these, God promised to anoint a very special King to reign forever in perfect wisdom and righteousness. He would be the Messiah with a big M. The word Christ is not Jesus' last name. It is the Greek word for anointed one or messiah. It is the same as saying Jesus the Messiah. By the way, Jesus simply means "God saves." God left small clues and big clues throughout the OT writings about how to recognize the Messiah when He came. Those OT prophecies spanned a period from around 1500 BC to 500 BC. We'll look at some of those later.

Even though Luke's Gospel is all about Jesus, he actually doesn't begin with the birth announcement about Jesus that we are familiar with from Christmas pageants. He begins with the birth announcement about John the Baptist in Lk. 1:5-25. We don't typically talk about this incident at Christmas time, but it is connected with the birth of Jesus in very significant ways. We'll talk more about those connections in coming weeks.

This story is about Jesus' relative, John the Baptist. His sole purpose in life was to call attention to the arrival of the Jewish Messiah. That is what this story, the first story of Luke's Gospel, is all about—the announcement of the birth of this special messenger, John the Baptist. After studying this passage, I think a good serious title for this story is:

God's faithfulness overrides doubt at the announcement of John the Baptist's birth.

A more tantalizing title though might be "Wake up and smell the incense."

## Background and setting

### Herod

Luke places this event "in the time of Herod king of Judea." Herod came to power in 37 B.C. and he died in 4 B.C.—just after John the Baptist and Jesus were born. Ask me later how Jesus could be born in 4 BC when BC means Before Christ. When we get to Matthew in a few weeks, I'll go into more detail about Herod. It will be more relevant then.

### Temple

This incident takes place in the second most sacred place in Temple, the Holy Place. It had three objects in it. It had a lamp stand, a table with twelve loaves of bread for each of the 12 tribes of Israel, and an altar for burning incense. Every morning and evening, Sunday through Friday, priests would burn animals as sacrifices for sins on the altar outside, and every morning and evening, Sunday through Friday, a priest would go into the Holy Place alone and burn an incense offering. Symbolically it was to accompany and cover the bad smell of burning animals with a sweet smell as the smoke ascended to God in heaven. When I told Carolyn Chester I wanted to burn incense in the Eagle's Nest, she said, "That would be great, the Eagle's Nest needs some incense."

Priests

In verse 5 Luke reports:

***there was a priest named Zechariah***

Zechariah is a Hebrew name that means “Jehovah remembers.” It is certainly fitting that John the Baptist’s father would be named “Jehovah remembers.” The last prophecy about the Messiah had been uttered nearly 500 years before that. In addition, the last prophecy in the OT testament was about John the Baptist. We’ll look at that in a few minutes because Gabriel refers to that prophecy. Many Jews doubted that God remembered His promises.

Luke continues:

***who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah***

The priests were the men who worked in the Temple, performing the daily sacrifices. They were set apart by God for going into the special holy places of the Temple and using the special objects in those holy places. They blessed people with God’s blessing. They interpreted the scriptures and taught the people. They enjoyed high positions of leadership and esteem in their home communities. People honored them everywhere they went.

Zechariah was a member of an order of priests that were descended from the very first high priest Aaron. You might recall that Aaron was Moses’ assistant. Scholars estimate that in the time of Jesus there were 18,000 priests in this order of priests, but they did not all work at the Temple at the same time. They belonged to twenty-four divisions. Zechariah belonged to the division of Abijah, another one of his ancestors. These were for the most part very devoted men. They were in a position to know very well the OT prophecies concerning the promised Messiah. Luke writes in Acts 6:7 that a large number of priests became followers of Jesus. Because of their knowledge of the prophecies and of their experiences with Jesus, they became convinced Jesus was the Messiah.

Luke adds:

***his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron***

Not only is Zechariah a descendant of Aaron but his wife Elizabeth is also. In a culture where your ancestry determined your social status it was very significant that she was a descendent of Aaron also. This would have increased Zechariah’s social status among the people and among the other priests. Of course, if they had a son, he would inherit and then pass on this perfect priestly pedigree.

Upright in the sight of God

Next, in verse 6 Luke establishes that:

***Both of them were upright in the sight of God,  
observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.***

To this ancestral priestly purity, Luke now adds their outward legal and ethical purity. Luke starts with the general statement that they were upright in the sight of God and then specifies what that meant in the Jewish context.

To the 10 Commandments and regulations God gave the Jews in the first five books of the Bible, the Jews of Jesus' day added hundreds more. There were literally hundreds of commands and regulations governing every area of life. The phrase "commands and regulations" represents the whole enchilada of what a priest was to do moment-by-moment, day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month and year-by-year to live a perfect life. It was a rigorous, highly repetitive and disciplined lifestyle. To live this way constantly measured one's own moral excellence against God's perfect moral excellence. Zechariah was a member of the class of priests that had one of the most strict, confining and numerous sets of rules to live by.

To summarize, Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous by the highest standards of first-century BC Judaism. To this point, all is positive. Zechariah and Elizabeth are depicted as having it all—the most moral and ethical lifestyle one could have and high social status. They were members of the elite upper class. They should be respected and even envied by the rest of their community. What could be wrong in their happy home?

The Barrier

In verse 7 Luke introduces the complicating problem or the barrier, which will come into play in this story.

***But they had no children,  
because Elizabeth was barren;  
and they were both well along in years.***

This is a doubly difficult barrier as Elizabeth was not only barren but also past her childbearing years. When she was still in her childbearing years, they still had reason to hope she would conceive, but now there was no hope based in human reality. Even today, we don't have the technology to make a woman past her childbearing years pregnant. Luke contrasts their blamelessness with their childlessness.

In that culture, no matter what her social status was she was made to feel disgrace if she did not have a male child. In this desperate situation I wouldn't be surprised that Elizabeth kept asking her husband the priest, "Where is God in all this? What have we done to deserve this? We have lived more uprightly than most people do who have children. Why didn't God bless us with a child, even a daughter? Does that kind of questioning sound familiar? Often in our pain we even

try to blame someone else. In the height of her anger Elizabeth might have screamed “You’re a priest. Can’t you do something? We all experience it in different ways don’t we? Why didn’t God bless me with a better job? Why do we have a handicapped child? Why can’t we have a child?”

The OT made it clear that God controls the womb. Israel has encountered this situation before through two OT couples: Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:10-15) and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20). God worked miracles to provide a son for each of them past their childbearing years. Although these couples lived about 2000 years and 1000 years respectively before Zechariah and Elizabeth, their stories were well known and would have been in the hearts and minds of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They would have been using their examples as constant reminders to ask God in faith to miraculously provide a son for them as well.

Up to this point, Luke has introduced the characters of the story, set them in their historical and cultural context, revealed the double barrier to them being blessed and next he will describe the main event that took place.

In verse 8 he continues:

***Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty  
and he was serving as priest before God,  
he was chosen by lot,  
according to the custom of the priesthood,  
to go into the temple of the Lord  
and burn incense.***

Zechariah is at the temple on a weeklong assignment to serve there. God did not want them to use any kind of human logic or strategies to choose the priest, so He had them cast lots, which was a lot like rolling dice.

Here are the rules:

1. Wait patiently for your turn. If you die of old age before you are chosen, tough luck.
2. If you were ever chosen to go in to burn incense before, you are not eligible again.
3. If you are chosen, go directly into the Holy Place, burn the incense and come out. Don’t spend time gawking at the decorations.
4. No gum chewing as it offends God and if you accidentally drop it into the burning incense the smell will really offend God.
5. No whining if you don’t get picked!

Seriously, the casting of lots was very serious business. I don’t mean to make fun of the process that God chose for them to use to enter into His presence. I am trying to use the humor to emphasize that the priest had little freedom of choice or expression in how he served God. We have all kinds of freedom in how we serve God. Part of that reflects God’s new way of involving us in His service and part of it involves the individualism in our culture, both good and bad.

The use of this procedure guaranteed that humans could not predict or control who would go in, and they understood that God sovereignly controlled the outcome of the cast. Again, a priest could only be chosen for this special duty once in his lifetime. Many priests never got the chance. Once a priest was chosen to burn the incense offering he was eliminated from all future opportunities. Zechariah had to be very aware that he was chosen by God alone to go in there on that day.

In verse 10 Luke continues:

***And when the time for the burning of incense came,  
all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.***

Next, the plot moves from Zechariah's public life outside of the Temple to the second most private place in the Temple and into the most private place of his life. This will be where we meet the real Zechariah—the man under the fancy robes—the man behind the upright lifestyle.

***Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him,  
standing at the right side of the altar of incense.  
When Zechariah saw him,  
he was startled  
and was gripped with fear.  
But the angel said to him:***

How would you react if an angel appeared to you? Keep in mind that this was before 20 centuries of art depicting angels with wings, blond hair, blue eyes, fair skin and comforting expressions. It was before “Touched by an angel” and other TV shows and movies. Luke does not describe what Gabriel looked like, but I'll bet we would have all be terrified along with Zechariah.

I want to show you something about Gabriel's announcement that is not readily apparent in our Bibles. It actually has the structure of a poem.  
(Read 13-20).

Analyzing it as a poem yields wonderful insights and will cast away any doubt you ever had that I'm a geek. Why would Gabriel speak to Zechariah in a poem? A poem is more memorable than prose. He wanted Zechariah to remember his words and tell them to others. Speakers and authors also use poetry to focus attention on certain ideas and to express those ideas in a more effective or efficient way. About two thirds of the OT is poetry. Most of the prophets spoke and wrote in poems for maximum effect on their listeners and readers. There are poems in the NT Gospels as well as in the Epistles and Revelations. Let's unpack this poem by Gabriel. I like to call it Gabriel's Song and no I don't think he is related to Peter Gabriel.

1:5-25 Gabriel's birth announcement poem (Gabriel's Song)

Now I know this is really going to come across geeky, but I have preserved the word order of the Greek text as closely as possible to still be readable in English, but it won't be as smooth as the NIV. The reason for doing this is helps in interpreting the meaning more accurately.

But said to him the angel:

I     Fear not, Zechariah,  
          because was heard your request,

The angel tells Zechariah to not fear because his request was heard. In other words, since the angel is there to deliver an answer to Zechariah's own prayer request (most likely in a positive way) then he should relax. The angel is not there to punish or destroy him.

II       and your wife Elizabeth will bear a son to you,  
          and you shall call his name John;

Apparently, Zechariah had been praying for a child, probably a son. He probably was thinking of Abraham and Sarah and "hoping against hope" for a miracle from God. Elizabeth will bear a son. The second line further specifies they are to name him John. John is from the Hebrew name, Johanan, which means "God has been gracious." This is a fitting name for a son miraculously given to Z. and E. in their old age. It is also fitting because he will be the messenger for the Messiah who will save His people by His grace. A new age is arriving where grace will abound.

That Zechariah's neighbors and relatives want to name the boy Zechariah implies that custom would normally dictate or strongly influence it (1:59). The angel's instruction to name him something different heightens curiosity. What else will be different about the son they were longing for? The unusual nature of this child will not end with the miraculous conception. That Z. and E. were so constrained by social and religious expectations to preserve the status quo might help account for his suspicion of the angel's truthfulness. We'll come back to this.

III       and you shall have joy and gladness,  
          and many over his birth will rejoice.

The first line relates a result that would be quite natural. Joy and gladness will replace their intense frustration, disappointment and disgrace. The second line extends the rejoicing to the general population and thereby raises still more curiosity. What will he do that will cause so many people to rejoice?

IV       For he will be great in the eyes of [the] Lord,

The first line gives the reason the many will have for rejoicing. He will be a powerful, influential, famous, public leader as evaluated by God's own standards.

          and wine and strong drink by no means may he drink,

The second line introduces another unusual characteristic of this unusual child. Not only will he be an unusually great person, he will not be like other great people. He must dedicate himself to God's service to an unusual degree. His abstinence from alcoholic beverages will distinguish his lifestyle from the normal lifestyle of a great person or even of an average person. In this way, he

must live for and serve God alone. His ascetic lifestyle will keep him focused on his narrowly defined God-given task. Most of the other great people mentioned in the OT were kings who naturally lived lavishly luxurious lifestyles involving the best of wines, so it is unusual for a great person to live an ascetic lifestyle.

V                                   and with the Holy Spirit he will be filled,  
  even from the womb of his mother,

These two lines relate an additional characteristic of this unusual child. The Holy Spirit will fill him from his conception. There is a strong analogy here to Samson in the book of Judges who was set apart for God's service, abstained from alcohol and was filled with the Holy Spirit. However, this is the first case of such a permanent filling of the Holy Spirit. Paul's admonishment to "not be drunk with wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit" seems to echo these lines.

VI                                   and many of the sons of Israel  
  he will turn to the Lord their God;

The emphasis is first on "many" and then on their repentance. This predicts John will have an impact on a large scale. The Lord God of Israel is the object to which they will return. Therefore, they will repent from their sins and indifference and renew their relationship with Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel.

VII                                   and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah,  
  to turn [the] hearts of fathers to children  
  and (to turn) disobedient ones to [the] understanding of [the] just,  
  to prepare for [the] Lord a people having been prepared.

The last line sounds a little weird but the repetition emphasizes the main purpose for John the Baptists ministry. This stanza asserts that he will be the forerunner to the Messiah that the prophet Malachi predicted. In Malachi 3:1, God says,

"See, I will send my messenger,  
    who will prepare the way before me.

Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking  
    will come to his temple;

the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire,  
    will come,"

This teaches that the Messiah will actually be the Lord God Almighty Himself and He will come to His temple. First, though, He will send a messenger to prepare the way before Him. In the ancient world, the roads were terrible, so when a king would travel to another city they would often send a work crew ahead of him to repair the road to make it smooth for the king's carriage. In the Messiah's case however, a messenger will tell the people to prepare spiritually for the

Messiah's arrival. The Messiah will then come to the temple to worship God and offer a sacrifice. In Jesus' case, of course, he would offer Himself as the sacrifice.

In Malachi 4:5 and 6 God gives more specific information about this.

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah  
before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.  
He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,  
and the hearts of the children to their fathers;  
or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

This teaches that the messenger of 3:1 will be so similar to Elijah as to make people think he is Elijah come back to earth. Elijah was one of the most famous of the OT prophets. Reconciliation between fathers and their sons will be a hallmark effect of John the Baptist's ministry.

Coming back to Luke 1:17 we see how the phrase “He will go before him” refers to the messenger in Malachi. Therefore, Gabriel tells Zechariah that his son will be that messenger that will tell people that the Messiah, that is, God Himself, is coming. New Agers try to use the phrase “in the spirit and power of Elijah” along with other references to John the Baptist and Elijah to say the Bible teaches reincarnation. They say that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of Elijah. This is not true. The phrase is a figure of speech that means the effect of John's ministry of prophecy will be as powerful as that of Elijah's. That impact will be a sign to help us identify John the Baptist as the messenger predicted by God through Malachi.

Gabriel reaffirms that he will “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and adds that he will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.” In other words, John will tell people the Day of the Lord is here. The Messiah is coming. God is coming. The good news is that if you repent God will save you. The bad news is that if you don't repent terrible things will happen to you. As a result, many people repented and fixed their broken family relationships and started living righteous lives. A similar thing happened after the 9/11 attack. People cleaned up their lives and mended their relationships with their families. Then he adds the summary statement that John's purpose is to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Again, this matches up with Malachi's prophecy. It also matches up with Isaiah's prophecy in Is. 40. I played the part of Handel's Messiah that uses that text as you were coming in this morning.

What would you say to an angel who told you all of this would come true through you? This is utterly shocking. It is a total surprise. Zechariah had to feel blindsided by this.

Let's move on to verse 18:

And said Zechariah to the angel:

By what shall I know this?  
for I am old  
and my wife advanced in her days.

Zechariah asks a very short simple question and gives two reasons for his question: He is old and his wife is old (past her childbearing years).

And answering the angel said to him:

I am Gabriel the [one] standing before God,  
and I was sent to speak to you  
and to announce to you these things;

and behold you shall be silent  
and not being able to speak until the day when these things happen,  
because you not believed my words,  
which will be fulfilled in their time.

When I first read Zechariah's question I didn't see any problem with it. It seemed like a good question asked for two good reasons. Well, we find out from Gabriel that Zechariah's question is really full of doubt. Zechariah is accusing an angel of not telling the truth. He is challenging an angel to give a miraculous sign to prove that what he is predicting will really happen, and that's serious.

Here is the crisis point of the story. This is where the conflict between the failure of human ability and trust in God's ability reaches its greatest tension. It is a crisis of doubt. Here is a priest who knows the OT backwards and forwards doubting an angel. He knows the prophecies concerning the Messiah and His messenger. In addition, there is not one incident in the whole OT that I can find of a person doubting what an angel says is true. On top of that, he is supposed to believe that he is in that room purely by God's providence. What was he thinking? Why did he doubt?

The only reason I can come up with was that he was so programmed to live his life moment by moment by a rule book that he couldn't imagine the forest for the trees. He was an anal retentive pinhead who forgot why he was even a priest. Living by all those commandments and regulations did not produce in him an ounce of faith. God had not fulfilled his prophecies for 500 years, and Zechariah lost hope and was just cynically going through the motions of religiosity. He was just living by what everyone else expected of him. He was one of those white washed tombs that Jesus spoke about who was spiritually dead inside.

Now I am tempted to believe that Luke did withhold the truth from us about what really happened in the Holy Place that day. Actually, Gabriel grabbed Zechariah's fancy lapels and shook him and slapped him and yelled, "Zack, wake up and smell the incense!"

No, instead, Gabriel patiently answers in two parts just as God answers my doubts so patiently. First, he establishes his identity and authority. When I doubt, God reminds of who He is and why He is trustworthy.

The second part of Gabriel's answer describes the sign that he will give Zechariah. He will not be able to speak until John's birth. The second line specifies two aspects of what it will mean to be silent. He will not be able to speak and the speechlessness will last until Gabriel's prophecy is fulfilled. We learn in Luke 1:64 that only John's birth was required to fulfill the prophecy enough to release Zechariah from his speechlessness. We look at that in a few weeks. The rest of the words will be fulfilled in their time though. The third line gives the reason for this speechlessness as Zechariah's not believing the angel (doubting that the angel was telling the truth). In line four the repetition of the idea of fulfillment emphasizes the certainty that the prophecy will, indeed, be fulfilled.

The punishment seems to fit the crime. If Zechariah believed the angel he would naturally want to excitedly announce to everyone he sees that he is going to have a son. Now, his speechlessness confirms the truth of the angel's news, but he is unable to share it with many people himself. Even so, he would at least be able to write out the news to share with people, and the news might spread even faster because of the supernatural nature of this event. Still he would miss the joy of telling people with his own voice.

I wonder what would have happened if Zechariah had believed Gabriel's words would come true. Perhaps God would have given a different sign, that is, a positive sign to verify his words.

In verse 21 Luke continues:

***Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah  
and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.  
When he came out, he could not speak to them.  
They realized he had seen a vision in the temple,  
for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.***

There were almost a thousand priests in town that week and around the Temple. There was also another whole organization of Levite Priests who were also on duty at the Temple doing the more menial tasks. The group of worshippers and their song leaders, prayer leaders and musicians would have been made up of a lot of these priests. You can be sure that Zechariah was interviewed by a lot of other priests, probably even the high priest himself along with the chief priests who were in charge of the Temple. I wonder how many of the younger priests were still living 30 years later when John the Baptist was grown up and preaching. I wonder how many of them were in the group of priests that became followers of Jesus that Luke refers to in Acts 6:7.

***When his time of service was completed, he returned home.  
After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant  
and for five months remained in seclusion.***

The climax or high point of the story comes when Elizabeth miraculously becomes pregnant. The climax, as a miracle, is an act of God. It is the logical conclusion in that it not only fulfills the angel's prophecy in the temple but also begins to fulfill the ancient prophecies of a forerunner to the Messiah who would prepare his way.

This climax assures Luke's first century readers and us that God will accomplish His plan and fulfill His promises through and in spite of imperfect people. It shows that not even someone's doubt or disobedience can interfere with God's will. In His will He will make a way to use whomever He decides to. Like an expert chess player God could use Zechariah in his doubt just as effectively as if Zechariah had not doubted. No matter how Zechariah responded, God would still win! In fact, in this case Zechariah and Elizabeth won too. That is exciting to me. I am not going to be a barrier to God's work in my imperfect faith and I am not going to be a barrier to God's work in my moments of doubt. God is certainly bigger than me.

That does not give me an excuse to doubt or deliberately try to stand in God's way though. I would rather be used by God in positive ways through my faith and obedience than used by God in negative ways through my doubt and disobedience.

As to why she remained in seclusion for five months, we are not sure. She might have always stayed inside her house because of her public disgrace from not having any children, and by the time she was five months pregnant all would then be able to see that she truly was pregnant.

In verse 25 Luke gives the resolution to the original complication.

***"The Lord has done this for me," she said.***

***"In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."***

The resolution occurs when she rejoices in the favor God shows her. God solves the complication her barrenness imposes on their social status too. There is something else that is very significant about Elizabeth's statement, and that is the fact that it appears at all. We are told by modern historians that in that culture and generally in the ancient cultures a woman's thoughts and feelings were worthless, at least in public. This will be the first of many times that Luke permits women to speak for themselves and show the impact that God had on their lives and they had on God's life. This sets God's Word miles apart from other ancient literature. Women are valuable to God as women.

## Applications

This story embodies some parallel truths that we haven't really spelled out yet but are very important to the people of Zechariah's time as well as to us.

## Their complication

Zechariah and Elizabeth, in several ways, represent Israel at the time. Zechariah represents the faithfulness and piety of many Jews to live by God's laws for ethical living. However, living an ethically perfect lifestyle does not necessarily produce faith, salvation and blessing. Elizabeth represents how the Jews suffered social disgrace because they were ruled by an oppressive pagan empire. They did not have the social status of being an independent nation as they once were. Furthermore, they were not experiencing God's blessings in their own land. They were spiritually barren.

## Our complication

Living a perfectly ethical lifestyle cannot save us, guarantee God's blessing. Neither will social status.

## Their crisis

Just as Zechariah's perfect ethical lifestyle could not produce the faith to believe God's promise, many others in Israel faced the same crisis of doubt. They crucified their Messiah. Doubt is not a barrier to God's working though. Just as God provided a sign to validate Gabriel's words, God provided Jesus' resurrection as a sign to validate His words.

## Our crisis

We are full of doubts. We doubt that God's solutions will work for us. We doubt that anything will change for the better. We think if we just keep doing what we are doing that we will eventually solve our problems. We doubt that God will come through. We ask God for signs to validate what we already know to be true but can't bring ourselves to have faith.

## Their high point

Israel, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, needs God's wise and powerful intervention and assistance. They need the salvation and blessing that only God can give from His grace and mercy. Their disgrace is not just social disgrace but spiritual disgrace as well. When God intervenes in their lives to give them a son, he also intervenes for Israel by providing a prophet who will call Israel back to a right relationship with Him. He will help them prepare for the Messiah who is coming to offer salvation.

## Our high point

We needed John the Baptist too. We need his message that challenges us to choose between God's offer of salvation, restoration and blessing on the one hand and His just judgement and condemnation on the other. Zechariah was one of a small number of people who come so close to God's presence in the Temple. First, he had to qualify as a descendant of the first high priest, Aaron. Then he had to live an ethically perfect lifestyle by following hundreds of commandments and regulations. Finally, God had to select him to come before Him and once in his lifetime at that. God has reversed this for us. He has selected us to live in His presence permanently. The veil that separates us from Him was permanently torn apart. He did not do this because of our perfect obedience to laws and regulations. He did it solely because of His love, grace and mercy. Now he calls us to live ethically from the heart because when we do that the outward lifestyle follows. Finally, our descendants will be blessed and more likely to enter into this relationship with God.

## Their resolution

The resolution or solution to Zechariah's and Elizabeth's physical barrenness and disgrace occurs when she rejoices in the favor God shows her. God solves the complication her barrenness imposes on their social status too. Israel as a people did not rejoice over the salvation that Jesus brought and thereby still suffers spiritual disgrace. God's ancient promises will, however, one day be fulfilled in that Israel will return and be restored.

## Our resolution

As Christians we receive our Messiah, or Savior and Lord, with open hearts and like Elizabeth rejoice:

***“The Lord has done this for me, In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”***

He has taken away our spiritual disgrace. In many ways, he takes away our social disgrace as we learn to live a life that pleases Him in every way.

Do we need a sign to validate God's Words? His resurrection validates it all. We don't need any more signs; we just need to put our faith in God and His trustworthiness. First, we need to receive His gracious and merciful salvation, and then we need to continuously tune our hearts, minds and attitudes toward God trusting in Him to provide what we need.