

Declaring the Break of Dawn

The Gospel According to Gabriel – Part I

Luke 1:5-25

Introduction

It is impossible to explore the birth of Christ without encountering one angelic visitation after another.

- An angel will announce the birth of John the Baptist.
- An angel will deliver the news to Mary of her pregnancy.
- An angel will assure Joseph that Mary has conceived of the Holy Spirit.
- An angel will deliver the news of Christ's birth to shepherds.
- Angels will chant their praise to God in the skies above Bethlehem.
- An angel will warn Joseph to hide in Egypt to escape the violent purge of little boys by Herod's own decree.

Angels were busy scurrying about in these early scenes. They were carrying out the details of God's redemptive plan so that all went according to the divine script.

I pulled a volume off my shelf entitled, *All the Angels in the Bible*, by Herbert Lockyer, and read in the preface of his work an interesting personal account that he recorded. He was in Kenya, Africa, on of a preaching tour, and, on one occasion, spoke at a missionary school outside of Nairobi. In the audience was a native tribesman who would end up accepting Christ as his Savior there in the school's chapel. After the service, he told Dr. Lockyer of the event that had led him to attend the service. Earlier, he and other tribesmen had decided to invade this

school compound with its mission station and school for missionary children. These young and ruthless warriors had made a pact together to climb up the hill to the school and capture and kill the children. However, as they made their way up the hill under the cover of darkness, suddenly men dressed in white robes surrounded the school. In the hands of each of these men was a sword that seemed to be on fire.

The staff all agreed, as they heard this story, that there was no other explanation.ⁱ

Recently, missionary Steve Saint preached at our church. He is the son of martyred missionary Nate Saint, who was killed, along with Jim Elliot and others, by Auca Indians. Steve told us that moments after killing the five missionaries who had come to deliver to them the gospel, these native Indian men saw hazy figures above the tree line and heard them singing music they had never heard before. Many months later, several of these tribesmen were converted to Christ. Afterwards, they sat listening to a missionary's record player – that is a machine that plays music recorded on round plastic things – to a recording of a choir singing hymns. The natives recognized the music and said it was like the music they had heard that day on the sandy beach coming from the figures hovering above the tree line. There is no doubt to Steve and the others that it was the singing of angels.

There are many in our world who are skeptical of the existence and ministry of angels. Obviously we can overdo our view of angels and become so infatuated with them that we have angel coffee mugs, angel jewelry, angel pajamas, and angel art somewhere in our houses or apartments. We can be

too enamored with them, or we can completely ignore them and even deny their existence.

The great puritan theologian, pastor, and author, John Owen, wrote that to ignore the angels is the height of ingratitude. He penned these words in his commentary on the book of Hebrews,

[We are to] search after what may be known of them . . . God hath neither appointed nor revealed them for nothing. He expects a revenue of praise and glory for it – and how can we bless Him for it when we know nothing of . . . angels. Let us bless God, I say, for the ministry of angels.ⁱⁱ

It has struck me, in re-reading these gospel texts describing what we call the Christmas account, that to deny angels would be to deny the central declaration of the gospel of Christmas. God used them to play a significant role.

I read one well respected author who made the statement that angels cannot preach the gospel – only Christians can.

This is not true.

In fact, the very first appearance of the Greek word translated “gospel” or “good news” comes from the lips of an angel.ⁱⁱⁱ

It will be an angel who delivers the gospel to shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. He declares,

Do not be afraid; for . . . I bring you good news [literally, the gospel] of great joy which will be for all the people;

for today in the city of David (this is the gospel) there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

(Luke 2:10-11)

This is the “euangelion,” or “the gospel”. This is the good news delivered by the hosts of heaven.

Now one particular angel stands out above the rest of the innumerable hosts of heaven who played a role in the incarnation account of Christ. He will be the angel who appears to Mary and announces that the baby she is carrying is the Messiah. He is the same angel who will appear to an old priest and deliver some startling news about his wife.

What I want to do together with you, is to dig into the rich truths delivered to mankind through this leading angel. He is part of the fabric of the gospel of Christmas. He shows up at critical times. This angel’s name is Gabriel.

Please turn to the Christmas account by Luke to chapter 1.

I, along with the Puritan pastor John Owen, believe that our study of these angelic encounters will lead us into a greater praise and glory of God.

Declarations by the Angel Gabriel

Gabriel’s first appearance will take place just outside the Holy of Holies, inside the magnificent temple of Herod.

Look at Luke 1:5.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

“Gabriel, this is your mark; he is My first assignment for you. That old priest down there will be the first to hear the news that the Messiah is almost here.”

Setting the scene

Before we go any further, let us set the stage for this dramatic encounter. The verse we just read told us a lot about this scene.

These were the days of Herod, king of Judea. This means, these were the days of a wicked and paranoid ruler.

Herod was also an older man – seventy years of age at this time. He had become insanely jealous of his power and his throne.

He had already secretly ordered the murder of the Jewish high priest because he was more popular with the people of Judea. And twenty-four months before he died, he also had his two oldest sons murdered because he was insanely jealous over the obvious fact that they would sit on his throne. In fact, just a week before his death, he killed the next son in line for the same reason.

However, Herod was well loved by many people, especially the Roman emperor. This emperor had the Roman senate grant Herod his wish and give him the title, “King of the Jews”.

We can imagine how upset Herod was when the Magi arrived and asked him,

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? . . . (Matthew 2:2a)

This was Herod’s title – and he killed any rival to his throne. This was the reason he would later order the murder of every little boy under the age of two living in the vicinity of Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:16)

These were not easy days to be a priest, serving God. But our text says that Zachariah was a priest, in the days of Herod, the king of Judea.

The bright spot for the Jewish people was the fact that Herod so desperately wanted their favor that he built the magnificent temple.

The temple itself was built from imported cedar and white marble. It was Herod's finest building project. In order to meet the standards of the Jewish priesthood, he used a thousand specially trained Levites as builders and masons.

The temple, not only was made of imported white marble, but had doors, as well as other portions of the building, that were overlaid with gold. Its shining brilliance lit up the city and could be seen gleaming from miles away.

Some of the wall that surrounded the entire temple precinct is still visible today. It is known as the Wailing Wall where orthodox Jews still go to pray.

Malachi had prophesied centuries earlier that,
. . . the sun of righteousness [would one day] rise with healing in [His] wings . . .
(*Malachi 4:2*)

The temple was constructed to match their hopes in the glorious dawning of the light of God's splendor.

Josephus, in fact, described the temple by writing in the first century these words:

Being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash you were compelled to avert your eyes. The temple appeared from a great distance away to be like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.^{iv}

Imagine, during the days of Herod, how the people anticipated the breaking of the dawn of God's glorious reign.

Notice the way Luke describes this faithful priest and his wife in Luke 1:6-7.

They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were advanced in years.

This alone was startling news. To be a priest; to be faithful to God; to be serving God with your life brought about the expected quiver full of children.

To the orthodox Jew, living in the first century, barrenness was considered the rebuke of God.

The rabbis of this day, in fact, taught that seven types of people could not expect an intimate walk with God. At the top of the list was a Jew who had no wife (so, single men could not expect the blessings of God), and second on the list was a Jewish couple without children. During the days of Christ, barrenness was even considered valid grounds for divorce.^v

To live as a faithful couple, serving God no less, and in this era under the covenant of promise regarding children, the inability to have them would have written a volume of pain and despair; of tears and questions. The community pitied them and the faithful Jewish community assumed the worst. In fact, Elizabeth will later describe her barrenness as her disgrace. (Luke 1:25)

Gabriel's declaration to Zacharias

We have just set the scene. Now, something startling is about to happen, and it all begins with the casting of lots.

Notice Luke 1:8-9.

Now it happened that while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division,

according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

To onlookers, this was just a chance roll of the dice that selected Zacharias out of some 8,000 priests to perform this sacred duty.

Understand that during the days of Zacharias, there were an estimated 20,000 priests.^{vi}

Only at Passover and at the Feast of Tabernacles did all the priests serve. For the rest of the year, each division – and there were twenty-four divisions – served two weeks out of the year.^{vii}

This just happened to be the week that the division of Abijah was serving. And this was the division of Zacharias. In addition, out of this division, perhaps as many as 1,000 priests were given their duties by the casting of lots.

Every morning and every evening of every day, a sacrifice was made in the temple for the whole nation. A lamb without blemish was offered, along with flour, oil, and a drink offering of wine.

Before the morning or evening offering was placed on the altar, one priest was given the special

duty of going into the Holy Place, just outside the Holy of Holies. In that sacred place was the table of shewbread, the golden candle stick, and the golden altar of incense in which were smoldering coals.

It was the high honor of this priest to pour incense over these coals just as the lamb was being placed on the altar outside so that, as it were, the sacrifices might go up to God wrapped in an envelope of sweet-smelling incense.^{viii}

The fact remained that there were so many priests, many of them never had the privilege of entering the Holy Place. In fact, if they were chosen by lot to burn incense upon the altar, they could only do it once in their lifetime.

This was the high point of Zacharias' life and ministry.

Luke 1:10 tells us that,

. . . the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

While Zacharias was inside the Holy Place, the court outside was jammed with the people and priests, praying that God would accept with pleasure their offering.

It was also the high privilege of this priest to finish his task and come out to the railing before coming down the steps and preach a brief sermon, blessing the people in the name of their faithful and forgiving God.

So Zacharias, with trembling old hands, lifts the censer and lets the contents spill slowly over the coals. It hisses and crackles as the sweet smelling smoke begins to rise.

At that moment, Zacharias is no longer alone. Notice Luke 1:11-12.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

And Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel (I'll bet!), and fear gripped him (no doubt!).

Later in the text, the angel will identify himself as Gabriel. Gabriel's name meant "mighty one".

This angel was well known to the priests and to the people of God. They had read of their prophet Daniel's encounter with Gabriel.

Daniel had described Gabriel in detail, in his encounters with this heavenly prince. This description is recorded in Daniel chapter 10.

1. First, Gabriel was wearing a linen robe. This was highly significant because a robe made of linen was the garment worn by the high priest when he entered the Holy of Holies each year. It was to be cleaned and ironed perfectly. It signified access to God, which Gabriel had plenty of.
2. Gabriel was further described by Daniel as having his waist girded with a belt of pure gold.
3. The body of Gabriel was described by Daniel as being like beryl. This was a greenish-blue stone. It could be a reference to the fact that his body seemed, to Daniel, to be like a strong rock.
4. Gabriel's face was said to be, by Daniel, as having the appearance of lightning. In other words, it was probably too bright to look at for very long. (Imagine this being in the room with you whose body and face are brilliant shades of blue and white and whose robe is perfectly tailored with a belt made of pure gold.)
5. The eyes of Gabriel, Daniel further described, appeared as if they were glowing with fire.
6. The angel's arms and feet, Daniel mentioned, glowed as if they were polished bronze.
7. Finally, Gabriel's voice was like the voice of a multitude. A long, low rumble that was powerful and forceful.^{ix}

And Zacharias was troubled . . . and fear gripped him. (Luke 1:12)

This is the understatement of the Christmas story. I am shocked that Zacharias remained standing – or breathing.

By the way:

- It was during the evening sacrifice that Gabriel had appeared to Daniel. (Daniel 9:20-21)
- Daniel's response to Gabriel's appearance was to fall down terrified. (Daniel 8:17)
- Daniel would be temporarily rendered speechless. (Daniel 10:15)
- And most importantly, Gabriel had delivered a message to Daniel describing future messianic times, and Gabriel is now

delivering a message to Zacharias about the dawning of messianic times.^x

Gabriel is announcing the breaking of the dawn – the sun is about to rise!

Notice Gabriel’s words, in Luke 1:13.

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.”

Now some would suggest that Zacharias was praying for a son – and that prayer would be answered. Based on his response to Gabriel’s announcement that he will be having a son, I do not believe Zacharias was praying for a son – I believe he was praying for a Savior. Like faithful priests were to do, Zacharias was praying for the deliverance of Israel.

“Zacharias, your prayer has been heard. In fact, your son is going to be the forerunner of the Messiah, prophesied to come.”

Gabriel says in Luke 1:17,

It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children [that is, to challenge men to shepherd their families], and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous [that is, to challenge the people to follow their Shepherd], so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Gabriel is telling Zacharias that he and Elizabeth are going to raise the prophet of God who will prepare the people for the Messiah.

Continue to Luke 1:18a.

Zacharias said to the angel, “How will I know this for certain? . . .”

In other words, “Can you give me some proof that God will do this?”

Imagine this scene. Here is Zacharias in the Holy Place – all alone, except that an angel is in there with him. The angel’s face is like lightning and his arms glow like bronze and his eyes are like lanterns of fire. And Zacharias says, “I need a sign from God.”

He says, in Luke 1:18b,

. . . “I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.”

Just like Abraham and Sarah of old did not believe God could produce through them the forefather of the Messiah, Zacharias did not believe

God could produce through him and Elizabeth the forerunner of the Messiah.

Continue to Luke 1:19a.

The angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel . . .”

There is a play on words in this verse in the original language. Zacharias emphasized,

. . . “I am an old man . . .”

The response from this angel was,

. . . “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God . . .”

“I’ve come directly from the presence of God. He sent me. You should know, Zacharias, nothing is impossible with God.”

Now notice Luke 1:19b,

“. . . and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”

This could be translated, “the gospel,” for the gospel is the good news of God.

In other words, “Zacharias, you’ve been waiting for the movement of God; you’ve been praying for the Messiah; you’ve longed for the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy that the sun would rise and the father’s would turn to their families and the people would repent and prepare their hearts for the coming One. Not only is God going to do this, He has chosen to give you a child who will grow up and, with the spirit and power of Elijah, prepare the people for the dawning of Messianic revelation.”

Gabriel says, “This is the good news – the gospel.”

“However,” Gabriel continues, “since you didn’t believe my words, you’ll not be able to speak your own words.”

Look at Luke 1:20.

And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words...

Luke 1:62 implies that Zacharias could neither speak nor hear. He made signs, according to Luke 1:22, and in Luke 1:62, people had to make signs to him.

Imagine, being a spokesman for God all your life as a priest, but now, you have the scoop on the most exciting news from heaven to hit Israel after four hundred years of silence – from the last words of Malachi to the opening words of Gabriel – and you cannot tell anyone about it.

I wonder, of those of us who can communicate, who have we told about this gospel; this good news – not that Christ is coming, but that Christ has come and that Christ is coming back?

Conclusion

Well, Gabriel has accomplished his first mission. He leaves a stunned priest, who now races home and begins to play charades with his wife. She desperately tries to understand her husband, who seems to have lost his marbles. He must have settled down long enough to perhaps write it out.

Along with the speech Zacharias will deliver at the birth of his son nine months later, he will say,

. . . *the Sunrise from on high will visit us (Luke 1:78)*

Gabriel is nowhere to be seen – he has disappeared into thin air. He slips off the pages of scripture as quickly as he slipped in.

This angel will show up again. In fact:

- Gabriel's first appearance has informed a man that his wife, who *could not* get pregnant, would.
- Gabriel's next appearance will inform a woman, who *should not* be pregnant, that she is.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/16/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Herbert Lockyer, All the Angels in the Bible (Hendrickson, 1995), p. ix.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. xiv.

ⁱⁱⁱ New Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament (Associated Publishers, 1972), p. 320.

^{iv} R. Kent Hughes, Luke, Volume One (Crossway, 1998), p. 19.

^v William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975 rev. ed.), p. 10.

^{vi} Hughes, p. 20.

^{vii} Barclay, p. 9.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 10.

^{ix} A. S. Joppie, All About Angels (Baker Books, 1953), p. 16.

^x Hughes, p. 22.