

Have you noticed how many stores are offering the convenient service of shopping for whatever you want - and never having to get out of your car...? You simply order your items online... with a special app (on your phone or computer)... then pull into a specially marked parking spot... and they bring all your items out to you. They even put it in the trunk of your car... if you want. ... Then away you drive.

I've never tried it... and I'm not so sure that I am willing... after an article I just read... about how our recent global supply-chain turmoil has been affecting this service. Store shelves are often bare now. (Stores cannot restock their shelves as they once used to.) ... So the drive-up service workers are substituting ordered items that they are out of... with all sorts of bizarre products.

Ajanay Barnes and her roommate were craving ice cream one night. They used the grocery-shopping app "Instacart" to load up a basket at Walmart. They asked for strawberry shortcake ice cream. They received sausage, egg, and cheese breakfast rolls. Instacart issued a refund. But Ajanay said *"I was craving this one specific ice cream. I guess Walmart had other plans."*

"Order-packers in stores are winging it..." says Rhett Mitter (a spokesperson for Instacart).

"Roses are swapped for bell peppers.... A thermometer was switched for mac and cheese. ... A rapid COVID test was traded for Halls lozenges."

Online shoppers have been left amused... puzzled... and annoyed. ... As there's been different supply-chain issues and shortages... you notice some weird, weird substitutions."

Isn't it great to know that *delivery* services are making some off-the-wall substitutions - **but God** never substitutes inferior products in answer to our prayer requests... and there is never any supply issues with God. Just look at this assurance we will see when we come to Luke chapter 11.

Luke 11:11-13 (ESV)

¹¹ What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Of course we are not ready for chapter 11... yet. We only began our study of Luke's Gospel *last week*... but our passage today (in chapter one) will drive this same message home to us.

(LISTEN to me please...!) ... God is full of surprises. He delights in turning impossible situations into opportunities to show His steadfast love for people. ... He fulfills His promises in His own way and according to His Own timetable... which can be frustrating at times... but He never goes back on His word. ... He is always faithful to do as He has said. And when He fulfills His promises... He always exceeds our expectations. Listen (now) to how all of this is taught by our passage today...

Luke 1:5-25

God finally broke through - **after 400 years of silence**. Luke's Gospel wasn't the first Gospel to be written of our New Testament... but he goes back further to start his Gospel (where the Old Testament ended – rather than the birth of Jesus.) ... After Malachi wrote... God did not speak again until He sent *Gabriel* to Zacharias. ... Israel endured so much during those

400 years of God not speaking through any spokesperson or messenger... to His chosen people.

Read with me the very last words that God communicated... before He began the 400 year gap of quietness.

Malachi 4:5-6 (ESV)

⁵ “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.”

God stopped speaking with **these** words. The Old Testament ended... but then God started speaking again (through Gabriel) – using these very same words! - WOW!!! ... [P A U S E] ... What was going-on with Israel... during God’s silence...?

There had been four centuries of war and woe. Poor little Israel had been kicked back and forth like a football in the ceaseless struggles between Syria and Egypt for power. ... Antiochus Epiphanies (a ruthless man... who Daniel prophesied would be like the Antichrist) had come and gone. During his rule... he had completely desecrated the Temple... slaughtering pigs on the alter... and erecting a pagan image inside. His were days of oppression... horror... and terror just like the days of the Antichrist will be. Eventually the Jews had fought back by what is known as the Maccabean Revolt... and gained a measure of independence. But not very long after... the Romans conquered them — and appointed Herod (who wasn’t even Jewish) to be “King” over them.

While this tortuous... impossible set of circumstances kept Israel on edge... it seemed to many that God had forsaken Israel. ... But as He often does...

the Lord began working with a single individual... one ordinary person among the many Jews of his day. ... God broke His four-hundred-year silence with an aging priest who had no special political or social significance. ... His name was Zacharias... which means “YHWH has remembered again.”

Luke 1:5a

Herod pretended to be “a good Jew” by eliminating pork from his diet... but he indulged an insatiable appetite for murder—a heinous violation of the sixth commandment. ... Herod the Great stopped at nothing to gain the title “King of the Jews”... and he would sacrifice anything to keep it... even his own sons.

He built a magnificent temple for the God of Israel—an architectural wonder in its day... but he had placed a Roman eagle over the entrance and also had built pagan Temples. Herod appointed one corrupt high priest after another. He taxed Jews through the temple in keeping with the Old Testament Law but then used the proceeds to break the first commandment... building cities and temples in honor of the Roman emperor and his pantheon of Roman deities.

When he helped the Jews... it was for political purposes—not because he cared about them or their God. ... Evil and ruthless... Herod the Great later ordered a massacre of infants in a futile attempt to kill the infant Jesus... whom some were calling the new “king of the Jews.”

Chuck Swindoll compares Luke’s opening phrase “*In the days of Herod, King of Judea...*” to a modern day author starting a narrative with “*In the days of Al Capone...*” (Both set us up for a GRIM story...)

Herod was an extremely cruel man and greatly oppressed truth and righteousness. Yet it was during his rule that John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were born. ... (LISTEN!)... **God delights to work in the darkest hours and circumstances.** ... [P A U S E] ... Do you believe that? ... This should encourage EVERY ONE OF US. ... It is **not** the condition of the circumstances that determines the potential... It is the power of God that determines every outcome. ... You absolutely MUST keep this in mind if you watch television news today... or read the paper.

So Luke mentions Herod... and then ALONGSIDE that name of HORROR... he puts “*a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah.*”

Could the contrast be greater(?) — the one a monster of iniquity... the other a man of integrity? ... One of these men was a vicious prince; the other man was a virtuous priest. ... One was a man of pressing drive... and wickedness; the other was a retiring and godly old man. ... One of them hated God; the other loved Him. ... One was a man who murdered his sons... his own favorite wife... and countless other victims as well; the other was a gentle minister of the Lord.

Herod may have done well in politics... but he was not impressive to God. The man who **was** impressive to God... was an obscure priest by the name of Zacharias. ... Luke (our sacred historian) **ignores** the haughty Herod... whose reign of terror and whose death in torment... are adequately chronicled elsewhere... and concentrates on the humble priest.

Luke 1:5b - 6

Please consider what (“*they were both righteous before God...*”) means. ... Most of us are playing our lives to someone. ... We may be trying to be righteous and Christian for the benefit and esteem of our neighbors... friends... and family. - That’s not **all** bad. ... But how much **better** to be righteous before the One who sees us in secret... Who knows our thoughts and actions when we are alone...? This what God REALLY wants from us!

Zacharias and Elizabeth were **righteous** - but not **sinless**. Sinlessness is not an option for any of us. The desire of their hearts was to belong to God and to serve Him. They were playing their lives to God. We might say these were very unusual people

Luke 1:7

This is startling ! They were both **righteous** ! (Look what they got for it!) Barrenness was about the worst thing that could happen to a married woman. ... To be childless was (1) economically... (2) socially... and (3) theologically disastrous. ... (1) economically - because parents had no one to support them in old age ... (2) socially - because (in the law) barrenness was sometimes a judgment for sin... and people will always **assume** the worst possible cause of a problem.... (How embarrassing!) ... And (3) Theologically - because Jewish theology at the time taught that childlessness indicated God’s displeasure. ... Jewish teachers generally insisted that a man divorce a childless wife so he could “move on” and have children.

Luke says, “and they both were now well advanced in years.” Among the Jews... “the commencement of old age” occurred when a person became

sixty-five. ... At seventy... he was said to have reached “grey-headed age.” After eighty... he was said to be “well advanced in years.”

In their barren old age... this godly couple often might have taken hope from Abraham and Sarah... from Manoah and his wife... and from exasperated and anguished Hannah. We can picture Zacharias and Elizabeth musing on these Old Testament characters and fanning their smouldering hopes. *“Perhaps God is saving us for something special. Perhaps He has an Isaac, a Samson, or a Samuel for us!”*

This is another bleak aspect of the situation that shows God delights and is able to do great things in spite of difficult situations. ... **God delights to work in the darkest hours and circumstances.** ... [P A U S E] ... Do you believe that?

Luke 1:8-10

There were far more priests and Levites than they needed... about 18,000 – 20,000. So they were divided into 24 clans and then further divided into divisions. Every division came and served in the Temple for two weeks. But a division had more than 100 priests (still more than was needed for the honor jobs.)

Every day one priest would be selected from the serving division for the highest honor. Many priests served their entire lifetime and never got picked. ... Once you were selected... you could never be selected for it again. A different priest who had never done it before... would be given the high honor of spreading incense on the alter in the Holy Place and then come out and pronounce the official benediction. This day... was Zacharias’ once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Zacharias was chosen by lot. ... I remember being very curious about this system for selecting someone... so several years ago... I read many different sources to try to find out. None of the commentators seem to want to touch it. I guess they are being careful – because no one really knows. But I did read what Alfred Edersheim thought. He was a Jewish historian... who wrote a book about Jewish customs during Jesus' day. Edersheim lived and wrote in the 1800's (about the time of our American Civil War.)

Edersheim wrote that when they cast lots... a number was first selected and kept secret from all the contenders. Then every contending priest would hold up (on either one or both hands) any number of fingers he wanted. Someone came along and counted all the fingers that were held up in the air. Once they got to the secret number – the priest whose finger was last counted was the one selected by lot.

Maybe that is how Zacharias was selected. Whatever the method was – we do know that it was God Who wanted Zacarias to put the incense on the altar that day. To a godly man like Zacharias... this was probably the biggest event of his life... a tremendous privilege. Surely he wondered what it would be like to enter the holy place. ... The whole event would have surely been filled with enormous anticipation.

Here was the established ritual for what he was to do.

Three priests were chosen by lot... before the morning sacrifice. ... The first lot determined who would cleanse the altar and prepare its fire. The second lot determined who would kill the morning sacrifice and sprinkle the altar... the golden candlestick... and the altar of incense. ... The third lot

determined who would come and offer incense... (This was the most privileged duty.)

Before dawn... hundreds of worshippers gathered at the temple. The morning sacrifice began when the incense priest walked toward the temple... through the outer courts... he struck a gong-like instrument known as the *Magrephah*. ... At this sound... the Levites assembled and got ready to lead the gathered people in songs of worship to God.

The other two priests (chosen by lot that morning) walked up to the temple on each side of the priest chosen to offer the incense. ... Next... all three entered the holy place together. ... One priest set burning coals on the golden altar... the other priest arranged the incense so it was ready to go. Then those two priests left the temple... bowing and walking out backward. The incense priest was left all alone in the holy place.

When the people outside saw the two men back out... exiting the temple... they knew that the time to offer the incense had come. ... Those hundreds of people bowed or kneeled before the Lord... and spread their hands out in silent prayer. ... They knew that at that moment the incense priest prayed in the holy place... in the very presence of God... for the entire nation. The burning of incense and prayer is a strong picture of prayer (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8).

What did Zacharias pray for? ... He must have thought about it carefully beforehand. ... He knew how long to pray... because he had attended the morning sacrifice as a worshipper many times before... and he knew how long the incense priest was to stay in the temple. ... He must have prayed for both needs of the nation of Israel... which was occupied and oppressed

by the hated Romans. But he must have also used his one-time opportunity of being so close in the presence of God... to pray for his deep desire that his wife would have a child.

Luke 1:11-12

I think that it is safe to say... that the angel who appeared to Zacharias was ***not*** a romantic figure... or a naked baby with wings. ... This angel was a glorious... fearful... and an awesome creature. ... Like most angels in the Bible... the first thing this angel has to say to his human contact is “*Do not be afraid.*”

Have you ever wondered how you might react... if you ever saw an angel suddenly appear in full glory...? (Putting my own feet in Zacharias’ sandals)... maybe he thought: “*Does this happen to everyone who does this? Huh! Why didn’t the other guys tell me about this?! ... I would have liked to know...*”

(Or maybe NOT!)... Luke used the Greek words (epesen phobos) which means that Zacharias was gripped with exceeding fear. Some translations say “troubled and afraid.” ... So I don’t think my earlier conjecture is ***IN***correct. Zacharias knew that he was unworthy... and probably wondered if the Heavenly Being had come to judge him for his sins.

Luke 1:13

The angel calmed Zacharias with wonderful news. Long after his wife’s body had passed the age of conception... their lifelong petition for a child would be granted. She would bear a son! The angel instructed Zacharias to give his child the name “John.”

“John” means “*God is gracious.*” John’s birth is proof that the Lord is gracious. He was gracious to Zacarias and Elizabeth... and to the nation Israel... in breaking 400 years of silence. But MOST OF ALL... In sending the forerunner of the Messiah – God is gracious in fulfilling His plan of redeeming mankind.

Zacharias and Elizabeth had prayed LONG and HARD through their impossible circumstances of barrenness. The nation of Israel had endured so much affliction and oppression... and prayed for their promised Messiah to come. God breaks His silence with this announcement: “*God is gracious.*”

(Listen!) Many prayers take much time to be answered. ... We need patience when we pray. ... Delay does not necessarily mean denial. ... Keep praying. God is gracious.

Luke 1:14-17

The angel not only gave the name of the son, but also detailed six aspects of John’s character.

1. He will be a joy and delight to you.

2. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. Being great in the sight of the Lord is true greatness. Many folk called “great” today are **not** great in the sight of the Lord.

The world will have a hard time discerning how John could be great, for John never wrote a book, was never on radio or TV, was not a world traveler, never went to college, never held high office in government, never achieved in sports, never owned a home or car, did not have a bank

account, his ministry lasted only six months, he died in humiliation, and he was not given an honorable, well-attended funeral. Yet he was great. Obviously there are other causes for greatness (such as devotion to Christ and His Word) than what the world thinks brings greatness.

3. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink. During their period of service in the Temple... every priest was required to abstain from any alcoholic beverage. Drinking alcohol was ordinary behavior in Jewish society. An on-duty priest... as well as someone who took a Nazarite vow... was to be “uncommon.” They were to separate themselves from normal life for a period of time – for a divine task. John the Baptist and Sampson separated themselves from normal life for a divine task (however) for the duration of their entire life.

4. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. *“Wait! Filled with what...?!!! ... I’ve never even heard of such a thing!”* This is Scripture’s first mention of the Holy Spirit. Although we can look back and see Him in the Old Testament... Jewish revelation about His existence wasn’t there in Zacharias’ day. Pentecost wouldn’t happen for 30 more years. (And it will be Luke who will write about it in Acts.)

But... here we see that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. This signals the restoration of the Holy Spirit’s prophetic work after 400 years of silence.

5. Many of the people of Israel he is going to bring back to God.

Crowds of Israelites did turn to the Lord through John’s ministry. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children. I think that this speaks of families being restored – which is very much a work of God’s

Holy Spirit... and also the nation's fathers (who had denied the Lord) will return to their spiritual children (the Israelites) by teaching them truth again. But this is also a direct quote from the very last verse of the Old Testament. (We read Malachi at the beginning of today's message.) John is connected (here) to Elijah.

6. He will go on before the Lord. John the Baptist was the Lord's forerunner, announcing His coming **in the spirit and power of Elijah.** John the Baptist was like Elijah of the Old Testament. Like Elijah, he had a spartan, earnest, and bold spirit, and he was despised by the rulers of the day. Jezebel and Ahab were enemies of Elijah and Herod and Herodias were enemies of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:18

There can be no resisting what J. Vernon McGee wrote concerning verse 18 (here)...

I cannot help but laugh at a verse like this. A great many people do not find humor in the Bible, but there is—and this verse gives us a taste of it. Here is a man, a priest, who has gone to God in prayer. At the altar of incense he says, "Oh, God, give me a son." Now when God says through the angel Gabriel, "I am going to give you a son," Zacharias replies, "How do I know?" He says, "My wife is old and I am old, and I do not think we can have a child." Yet he was praying for a son!

Have you ever prayed like that? You ask God for something, but you really do not believe He is going to give it to you. This is one reason we do not receive answers to our prayers. We have no faith at all. This man Zacharias is quite human, and I cannot help but laugh at him because that's the way I pray sometimes.

If an angel said to you, "Your prayer is heard," what would it mean for you? What is the "too good to be true" news in your life? ... You may have given

up believing God can bring it about. You may have been praying for a son... a daughter... grandson... granddaughter... mom or dad... to give their life over to Christ. You've been praying for years... and it hasn't happened. ... You may be facing an illness or an incumbrance of some sort. Maybe it's loneliness in your life... or a relationship that has gone really bad in your life. ... Whatever it is that might seem too good to be true for you, remember Zacharias.

Sometimes we tire of waiting for God's answer, and we take things into our own hands. God told Abraham he would be the father of a great nation. He and Sarah were old and Sarah was barren. Abraham waited what seemed a reasonable length of time. He finally decided to help matters along and had a son by Hagar, Sarah's maid. From that union came Ishmael. In his impatience, Abraham decided to help God out and, in the vernacular, he blew it.

In the same way, Zacharias could not believe that God had an answer for him. We've all been guilty of that at some time. We may in desperation take the wrong job, not trusting that the right one will turn up. In our hopelessness, suicide may seem the only answer. We can't believe God can untangle the mess we are in. We pay a price for our unbelief, just as Zacharias did.

Luke 1:19

The angel pulls rank. He says, *"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God."* In other words, *"God sent me. How dare you argue with me? I am all the proof that you need... What... I didn't scare you enough when I first appeared...?"* ... His name provides his credibility. *"I am God's personal*

servant.” Gabriel was trusted by God to provide Daniel with revelation in Daniel 8 and 9. ... “*But you want a sign...? O.K... then... Here you go...*”

Luke 1:20

Next week... we will see Mary ask Gabriel “How can this be?” But Gabriel won’t punish her. Why? Why did Zacharias’ question that seems innocent get punished... but Mary’s doesn’t?

Because Mary didn’t doubt God WOULD do it... she just wondered HOW HE WOULD. Zacharias could not believe that God WOULD.

Zacharias paid a price for his unbelief. His unbelief did not make God take his promise back; it just kept Zacharias from enjoying it.

When we do not believe God’s promise for our lives... we do not necessarily destroy the promise... but we do destroy our ability to enjoy the promise. What made this such a severe punishment was that Zacharias had such great news to tell... but now he couldn’t.

Luke 1:21-23

The custom was for the priest to come from the temple as soon as he was finished praying, to assure the people that he had not been struck dead by God. Zacharias’ delay had started to make the crowd nervous.

After the incense priest finished, he came out of the holy place through the great doors of the temple, and met the other two priests right outside the doors. Then the incense priest raised his hands and blessed the people with the blessing from Numbers 6:24–26. The hundreds of gathered worshippers knew what to do; they responded by saying, “*Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.*”

But when he came out... he could not speak to them. Doing the best he could through hand motions... he told the story of what happened to him in the temple. It's hard to know if everyone believed him!

The rabbis probably wrote the whole thing off as hysteria. Zacharias... after all... was merely a rustic priest... and he was old. Why take much notice of him? ... Imagine the sad frustration Zacharias endured... unable to verbally tell everyone:

“My friends... my fellow members of the beloved... patient people of Israel: The words of our prophets are coming to pass. My wife... as barren as Israel these four-hundred years... will conceive and bear the forerunner of the Christ!”

But he could say nothing. He remained powerless to strengthen their faith or to help them endure the dark days of Herod the Great.

Luke 1:23

So time passed. The sudden flurry of excitement in the temple and among the people died away. The priest... far from cultivating the limelight... retired to his country home. ... The world went on its way... people went on with their own affairs... and time stood still — or so it seemed. ... But in heaven God's great clock was ready to chime again.

Luke 1:24-25

Here are two lessons that SHOUT to us from Zacharias and Elizabeth.

First, *our impossibilities set the stage for God to do His best work.*

Do you have a son or daughter who is out of control, too old for you to discipline? Are you in a life-or-death struggle with an incurable disease? Is your marriage spiraling toward divorce? Finances hopelessly upside-down?

Stuck in a destructive compulsion or addiction? Whatever your alleged “impossible circumstances,” they set the stage for God to show His infinite power and amazing grace, to triumph over evil.

Second, *God’s delays are not necessarily His denials.*

Don’t misinterpret a “wait” as a “no.” Don’t think that if something hasn’t happened in the time you expect, God has said no. His timing and His method always differ from our own. Rather than letting unmet expectations become a cause for doubt, let them become a means of growth.

God is full of surprises. He delights in turning impossible situations into opportunities to show His steadfast love for people. ... He fulfills His promises in His own way and according to His Own timetable... which can be frustrating at times... but He never goes back on His word. ... He is always faithful to do as He has said. And when He fulfills His promises... He always exceeds our expectations.