

**Luke 1:5-14, 18-25**  
**The Hope of Zacharias**

Hope is a curious thing. It can be either positive or negative. If hope is fulfilled, then it is a time of rejoicing. But if what we hope for never comes to pass, the longing can be painful and debilitating. As a husband, Zacharias had hoped for a child. As a priest, he had hoped for an opportunity to present the offering before the Lord. As a Jew, he had hoped for the Messiah.

**The historical context, large**

The Jewish people are a people of promises. Beginning with Abraham, through the time in Egypt and the wandering in the desert, the conquering of Canaan and the time of the judges, through the glories of the United Kingdom of David and Solomon to the chaos of disunion, defeat and exile, the Jewish people had always had one ultimate promise -- the Messiah would come. Malachi 3:1, "Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before Me." For four hundred years God had been silent, and the Jewish people waited for the promise to be fulfilled.

**The historical context, small**

Herod (Herod I or Herod the Great) is probably the best known of the Herods mentioned in Scripture. His father, Antipater had been made governor of Judea and he had appointed his son governor of Galilee. When his father died, Herod was declared King of Judea by Octavian and, after driving the Parthians out of Judea, claimed his kingdom (37 BC).

Herod was an Idumean (Edomite), a people who were traditional enemies to the Jews. So to win the Jews over Herod:

Married Marianne, a member of the Hasmonean family that had ruled Israel during the intertestamental period,

Began a public works program such as rebuilding the temple and constructing the port of Caesarea,

Twice lowering the taxes,

During the famine of 25 BC he melted down his own gold objects to procure food.

Yet he was barbaric. He was jealous and paranoid and murdered his wife, her brother, her mother, and many of his sons. Perhaps his greatest atrocity was the massacre of the innocents (Matthew 2:16).

**Zacharias the person**

He was one of thousands of priests in Israel, serving in a village in Judea. As priest he taught Scripture, judged the people, and offered their sacrifices to God.

He was of the division of Abijah, one of the 24 priestly divisions. This does not necessarily mean he was from that family line, since the divisions had been refigured after the exile.

He had married Elizabeth, from the line of Aaron and thus accustomed to priests. Probably many of the men in her family were priests.

They were righteous not in the sight of men but of God (v.6). Despite the silence of 400 years and the hypocrisy of the Jewish nation during that time, Zacharias and Elizabeth had stayed faithful to God. They “walked blamelessly” - not meaning that they never sinned, but rather that obedience characterized their lives. 1 John 3:7, “the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.” This is a pre-Paul way of stating they were justified and sanctified. It is the same way Abraham was considered righteous, Gen 15:6, “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

Nevertheless, Zacharias and Elizabeth had not been blessed with a child. This had to be a bitter experience (1 Samuel 1:10) and it carried great shame in Jewish culture and was often blamed on the sins of the parents since children were seen as a gift from God. It is a reminder that even those who honor God are subject to the trials and disappointments of this world.

### **Zacharias the Priest**

The ordinance of offering incense was a vital part of the Jewish priestly service (Exodus 30:6-9). The power of the place cannot be overemphasized in the Jewish mind.

This must have been the pinnacle of his career as a priest. He was “chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord” (v. 9). There were different services performed by the priests at the temple and most stayed with the people waiting outside when the incense offering was made (v. 10). Only one of the many was permitted to go in and perform the service.

### **Zacharias the Pessimist**

This is the first recorded appearance of an angel since the visit to Zechariah nearly 500 years before. The response of Zacharias was typical (v. 12), he “was troubled . . . and fear gripped him.” His response was similar to Gideon (Judges 6:22) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), and is reflective of the simple fact that when confronted with holiness, even for the righteous, it is impossible to avoid recognizing our unworthiness.

The angel begins by telling Zacharias that his prayers are to be answered and “Elizabeth will bear you a son” (v. 13). It is unlikely that due to his advanced age, Zacharias had prayed this prayer recently. He had no doubt long given up hope. Yet God had remembered his prayer. It is a wonderful lesson in the faithfulness of God and the perfection of His timing.

Zacharias doubts God. He looked at his grey hair, his tired body, his wife's frailty and doubted. “How shall I know . . . ?” (v. 18) may not seem like more than an innocent question, but clearly Gabriel’s response indicates that Zacharias has sinned. He has doubted the word of God.

Gabriel’s response is unarguable (v. 19), “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God.” The “good news” he had been sent to bring was not just for Zacharias and Elizabeth, it was *the* good news that the time had come for the forerunner of the Messiah to be born.

The consequence of his unbelief was that Zacharias would “be silent and unable to speak” (v. 20) until those things took place. This meant that Zacharias would not only be unable to enjoy the opportunity to tell people he was to be a father, but that he would not be able to perform his duties as a priest.

### **Take Aways**

Even the righteous can fall into unbelief; let us be wary. Hebrews 2:1, “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it,” speaks of the gospel message, but its application to faith in the word of God in general is, I think, appropriate.

God is not limited by our lack of faith. Despite the doubt of Zacharias, the promises are fulfilled.