

ANGEL VISITATIONS PRIOR TO JESUS' BIRTH

BIBLE TEXT : Luke 1:1-38; Matthew 1:18-25

LESSON 260 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "They shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Luke 1:1-38

¹ Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,

² Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

³ It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus,

⁴ That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elisabeth.

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

⁷ And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were *now* well stricken in years.

⁸ And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

⁹ According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

¹¹ And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

The Sun of Righteousness

The prophets of the Old Testament had sung again and again of the day when Israel's Redeemer, the great Messiah, would come and break the power of their enemies. Malachi, the last of the prophets, had written by inspiration of God: "Unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" (Malachi 4:2). A new day was going to dawn when the darkness of sin would be pierced with a brilliant beam of light, and the Lord from Glory would come to bring salvation to His people Israel.

Now the voice of the prophets was still. For four hundred years no word had been heard from Heaven. There was spiritual darkness in the land, that ever grew deeper. Only the memory of what the earlier prophets had written kept hope alive. Surely the Messiah would yet come!

The Faithful Few

Here and there in the midst of the darkness still lived men and women who had faith that God would not forsake His people. They worshiped the God of Israel — and prayed and hoped.

Many Christians today, who are being persecuted in atheistic countries, keep their faith in the coming of Jesus, in spite of the spiritual darkness around them. God is keeping hope alive in the hearts of those who have purposed to be ready when Jesus comes.

Such faith had Zacharias and Elisabeth. They were descendants of Aaron, the first high priest; and Zacharias now had the privilege of serving in the Temple, ever looking for the coming of Jesus.

Zacharias' parents had kept their faith in the promises of God, and the name they had chosen for their son meant, "God remembers." They were confident that God had not forgotten His promise, first made to Eve in the Garden, that He would send a Redeemer. How could it be otherwise? God had again given the promise to Abraham, and had confirmed it with an oath. It could not be broken. All the nations of the earth were going to be blessed by the Seed of Abraham, and that could be none other than Christ, the Savior. He must come!

But long, weary years had passed without a glimmer of light. Instead, the world seemed to grow darker. Some of the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity with a hope that the new day was at hand, but life had continued in the same weary way.

The Temple of God had been rebuilt in Jerusalem by Herod the Great. It stood, an imposing palace of white marble. The eastern front was overlaid with plates of gold, which reflected the rays of the rising sun. But it was only a magnificent shell built by man. The Ark of the Covenant had been lost during the captivity, and only a stone rested in its sacred place in the Holy

him.

¹³ But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

¹⁴ And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

¹⁵ For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

¹⁶ And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

¹⁷ And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

¹⁸ And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

¹⁹ And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

²⁰ And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple.

²² And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

²³ And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

²⁴ And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

²⁵ Thus hath the Lord dealt with me

of Holies — a symbol that the glory of the Lord had departed.

The Israelites were permitted to continue their form of worship, and the priests served their turn as their families had been appointed by Solomon many hundreds of years before. The people gathered morning and evening outside the Temple walls to pray, while the priests within offered incense unto the Lord. They mourned over the glory that was no more, and prayed for the coming of their Messiah. O Lord, how long?

Zacharias' Priesthood

The turn came for Abia's family to minister in the Temple, and Zacharias was their priest. He and his wife were godly people who loved and obeyed the commandments. He was happy in his service for God.

As Zacharias donned the priestly robes, and took the incense into the Holy Place to burn upon the golden altar, as Aaron's priests had done 1500 years before, his heart thrilled with his task. Where could he be nearer to the Lord than in His Holy Place? And surely God would hear his prayers. Was not his name Zacharias — "God remembereth"?

A Son Desired

Zacharias and his wife were old. In their younger days, mingled with their prayers for the peace of Israel, they had prayed for a son; but God had not answered their petition.

When Zacharias finished his duties in the Holy Place, he was startled by a heavenly visitor. There suddenly appeared, between the golden candlestick and the altar of incense, an angel of the Lord. A revelation from Heaven! Were the 400 years of silence broken? Was God about to speak to His people again through the mouth of a prophet? **and was** Zacharias that prophet? Or was the angel going to announce the coming of the Messiah? Was this what Zacharias had been waiting and hoping and praying for? And yet, Zacharias was afraid.

Do not be afraid, Zacharias. The Lord has heard your prayers. Wonderful indeed, to have an angel stand before him with a message from Heaven! God had heard his prayers and was going to give him a son.

Zacharias had long since ceased to pray for a son. He thought it was too late — but God never moves too late. God was rewarding the faithfulness of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Now their Joy was to be full. Zacharias, thou shalt have a son! And what a son! His name must be John, meaning "A gracious gift of God."

It was going to be a happy day for Zacharias and Elisabeth when their son was born; but he was not going to be for them alone. The angel said: "Many shall rejoice at his birth. . . . And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God."

The Words of the Prophets

All the pious Jews had read the prophecies of Isaiah, announcing a messenger who would precede the Messiah. He would go ahead to prepare the hearts of the people to receive Jesus when He came. This messenger would be but a voice, crying in the wilderness; but the message he would preach would begin a new dispensation. "He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light" (John 1:8). John was the herald who announced the coming of a new day.

The message of John the Baptist would be: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). All that the

in the days wherein he looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among men.

²⁶ And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

²⁷ To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name *was* Mary.

²⁸ And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art* highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women.

²⁹ And when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

³⁰ And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

³¹ And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

³² He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

³³ And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

³⁴ Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

³⁵ And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

³⁶ And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

³⁷ For with God nothing shall be impossible.

³⁸ And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

Matthew 1:18-25

prophets had told about the first coming of the Messiah was now to be fulfilled. They had always spoken about the day that was coming. But now it was here. At last it had come ! It would be the happy privilege of John the Baptist to point with his finger to Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Zacharias' Unbelief

The news was too great for Zacharias to grasp. How could this be? His longing for a child had not been satisfied when he was younger. Surely now, he thought, it was impossible. But was not this the angel Gabriel, right from the presence of God, who was speaking to him? God Himself had sent the angel to tell the good news to Zacharias. Why should he doubt?

Why do we doubt God's promises? His Word is as sure as day and night. We say we believe God, but how often our faith is weak! Let us pray that God will help us to trust Him and believe every promise He has given.

Zacharias demanded a sign, and it was given to him. He would not be able to speak until the promise was fulfilled. For the next nine months he would not be able to utter one word, because he had not believed the message of the angel. When he could see with his eyes that he had a son, his mouth would be opened.

The Angel's Message to Mary

That was not the only message Gabriel had to tell. Five months later he came to earth again. This time he appeared to a young Jewish maiden who was of the tribe of Judah. And what a message he had to give to her! She was to become the mother of the Messiah! Every Jewish girl, through the long, weary years of waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled, had hoped that she might be the mother of Israel's King who would sit upon the throne of David. This honor was now granted to Mary. She was of the kingly lineage of David; but through the centuries of Babylonian captivity and Roman oppression, the royal splendor of Israel had faded. Our Lord's mother had no fortune nor fame of this world, but she was rich toward God. She had lived to please Him; and now the angel told her: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women... . thou hast found favour with God."

Think how thrilled Mary must have been to hear such words from the mouth of the angel of God! God had seen her years of faithful worship, her purity and holiness. He had noticed her when she perhaps never thought He might be watching. He had seen everything she had done — and she had found favor in His sight.

May all our works be such that will be pleasing to the Lord! Let us always remember that Jesus sees everything we do. When He has a special work to be done, He knows whom to choose, who will be prepared for the task.

Because the life of Mary was pleasing to God, He chose her to become the mother of the Messiah. Heaven was bending low, and Mary's Son was the Son of God. God was sending His Son to earth in the flesh.

Joseph's Visitor

One more visit the angel made. He appeared to Joseph and told him that Mary's Son must be named Jesus, "For he shall save his people from their sins." He would also be called Emmanuel, meaning "God with us." God was going to visit His people in a greater way than ever before. In the form of man,

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

²⁰ But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

²¹ And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

²² Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

²³ Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

²⁴ Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

²⁵ And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

He was going to live among men.

The dawn was breaking. A new day was at hand. The darkness of sin would be conquered by Jesus, the Light of the world. The Sun of Righteousness, of whom the old Prophet Malachi had written, was soon to be born. He would bind up the brokenhearted, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and preach that all men everywhere (whether Jew or Gentile) were welcome to come and to be saved from their sins.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Who was the last of the Old Testament prophets?
- 2 How long was it from the time he spoke until Jesus was born?
- 3 What does the name Zacharias mean?
- 4 Of what family was Zacharias? and what was his duty?
- 5 Who appeared to him in the Temple? What was his message?
- 6 What was the sign that the message was sure to be fulfilled?
- 7 What was to be John the Baptist's mission in life?
- 8 What was Gabriel's message to Mary?
- 9 How important was that message?