

Zacharias: An Answered Prayer

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

14 December 2025

Children's Talk: Incense and Prayer

Before anyone even knew that Jesus was about to be born, there were an old man and his wife who desperately wanted a child. They were named Zacharias and Elizabeth. They were so old that they did not have any chance of having a child anymore. But still, they followed the Lord, and continued to pray.

One day, Zacharias, who was a priest, had to go into the temple to burn incense. Since this story has to do with incense, it's worth talking about for a bit first. Incense is something that, when it is burned, makes good-smelling smoke, that rise up towards heaven. The priests would burn it in the temple. To make incense work, you need to start with a fire. So let me light this fire here. Then you add the incense. And then what goes up? Smoke, which smells nice because of the incense. If we did this properly, the whole church would fill with smoke, and would smell amazing. So now let's read what happened when Zacharias was in the temple burning incense.

So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." (Luke 1:8-14)

So with all this incense being burned, an angel appeared. And the angel said to Zacharias, "your prayer is heard." In other words, God had listened to his prayer for a son, and even though he and Elizabeth were too old to have children, she would give birth to John.

So this story is about incense and prayer. And actually, the two things are closely connected. Remember that for incense to work, you need to start with a flame, or heat, then add incense, and the good smoke goes up to heaven. Prayers

are like that too: the flame is like the love in our hearts; the incense is like the thing that we pray for; going up as smoke is like our prayers being sent up to the Lord. And just as Zacharias got an answer to his prayer when he was burning incense, we get answers to our prayers when they are from love and we send them to the Lord.

Now you might be thinking, “wait a second! I’ve never been visited by an angel when I’ve prayed!” And that’s true. But the Lord answers our prayers in other ways too. So let’s think of some examples:

You love your mom. And because you love your mom, your worried if you got her a good enough gift; will she like it? So you send up a prayer to the Lord, asking that your mom like your gift. The answer will be a small sense of comfort, that your mom will love your gift no matter what; or the thought that you put a lot of effort in, and that’s what matter; or trust that it will of course work out! Those feelings and thoughts are the answer to your prayer.

You love the Lord. But you have been having a hard time doing what he teaches. You’ve been getting angry and being mean to people. So you send up a prayer to the Lord, asking Him to help you with your anger, and to help you do the right thing. And He answers with a sense of confidence that you can do better, and hope that you will be able to change. That is how He answers your prayer.

So just like Zacharias burned incense that went up to heaven, and was answered by an angel, we can send up, from love, our prayers to the Lord, and He will answer in our hearts.

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The Christmas story begins not with the birth of Jesus, but that of John, who would as an adult prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. Our focus today will be on the announcement to Zacharias that his wife would give birth to John. On the surface this has little to do with the birth of Jesus, but in fact it is a crucial part of the way the Lord prepared the world for His birth, and indeed, shows how we also prepare for His birth in our hearts even today.

The context for everything that follows is given in one short but meaningful statement: "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea..." (Luke 1:5). Judea was the ancient land of Judah, the tribe that stood for love to the Lord; but through the years they had turned from the Lord, and were now ruled by Herod, who we know to have been a cruel, selfish, arrogant king. It was he who ordered the killing of all the children of Bethlehem, in a vain attempt to execute Jesus, the true claimant to his throne. This context presents a time when darkness and evil prevailed in the world. Likewise it reflects our own lives, in two possible ways: first there is the darkness and evil that seems to prevail around us. But it can also stand for the darkness and evil that prevail within us, in our own hearts and minds.

In spite of this context, within Judea there were still those who remained devoted to the Lord, faithfully keeping His commandments and offering true worship in His temple. We read of them that,

...they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. (Luke 1:6)

However, in spite of this, they were also old, and Elizabeth was barren. There seemed to be no future for them; no hope.

When we sit back and reflect on the evil in the world, or the evil within ourselves, I think we can often find ourselves in a similarly hopeless position, in spite of whatever commitment to goodness we ourselves might have. In the world at large, when we see corruption and theft and despair, we might, in our little corner of the world, in the areas we have control over, walk in the Lord's commandments, with integrity and kindness. But what difference does that make? How does that in any way change the state of the world? The small but honest transactions you oversee at work are a drop in the bucket compared to rampant corruption. The stack of sandwiches you make for the homeless pales in comparison to the vast poverty across the country. Our efforts to improve things appear barren, as it were, unable to overcome the darkness and evil of the world.

The same principle applies within ourselves. Many of us, I believe, are genuinely good people. On the whole, we walk in the commandments of the Lord. But what difference has that made to that one evil that you've struggled with for years? How does your general goodness change anything when you are overcome with anger, when you indulge in lust, when you refuse to forgive, when you hate your enemies in place of loving them? At times the progress you have made seems a drop in the bucket compared to the progress still needed. Your ordinary, everyday acts of kindness pale in comparison to how far you fall short when you are at your worst.

In this state of hopeless devotion, Zachariah was called to fulfil his duty as a priest and to enter into the temple to serve the Lord.

So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. (Luke 1:8-11)

This passage is filled with images of prayer. Incense in fact represents prayer:

Let my prayer be set before You as incense,
The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. (Psalm 141:2)

Just as clouds of smoky incense rise into the heavens, our prayers rise to the Lord.

But to burn incense in the temple, at the altar, is not just to make any sort of prayer.

These prayers are specifically ones that come from love and charity (*Secrets of Heaven* §10177). It is when prayers come from love and charity that they have power and are received by the Lord. And so it was with Zacharias: because of his life according to the commandments, and because of his genuine prayers of love and charity, he received an answer:

...the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."
(Luke 1:13)

It's all well and good for Zacharias to have received an answer, but that does not seem to be the case for us. I'm sure many of you have done the right things as much as you could, have poured out prayers day and night from a place of real love, and have seemingly received no answer. Evil persists, and wrong seems stronger than right. But God's answers do not come in the form of an angelic messenger; nor do they come in the form of the Lord sweeping away all our issues. If that is what we look for then we will miss the real answers He grants us. The Teachings of the New Church explain what it is we should look for in answer to prayer:

If his prayer springs from love and faith, and if they are wholly heavenly and spiritual things about which and for which he prays, something like a revelation is present within his prayer which manifests itself in the affection of the one praying in the form of hope, comfort, or some inward joy. (*Secrets of Heaven* §2535)

When you want answers, a vague sense of hope, comfort, or inward joy can easily be missed. Or, if you do notice them, they might not be what you wanted. But that is

the primary way that God answers our prayers: not in some grand gesture, but in an inward feeling that gives us hope and comfort.

In the case of Zacharias that hope came in the promise of the birth a son, John. The hope of his birth was that he would turn his people back to the Lord:

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, "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. (Luke 1:14-17)

In her old age and barrenness, Elizabeth would not only bear a child, but a child who would turn their people back to obedience to the Lord. There is a lot to unpack in this prophecy, but I want to focus on two things in particular.

First, that from the womb he would drink no wine or strong drink. Ordinarily wine, in the Word, stands for truth, which is good. But it can also stand for falsity, and drunkenness for being carried away by our own fallacious reasoning (see *Secrets of Heaven* §1072). That John would not partake of wine or strong drink symbolizes the truth from the Word that is untainted by our own agenda or preferences. He represents the unadulterated truth. It is this truth that can bring about the second part of the prophecy: the turning of the people back to the Lord and the restoration of obedience to His teachings. It is truth that actually changes the world, and that can actually change your own behaviour. It is the truth that committed people, devoted wholeheartedly to the Lord, actually do and have and will again make a difference in the world. And it is also the truth that even the worst sinner, the most selfish habits, the most deep seated inclinations of our hearts, can be changed through absolute devotion to the Lord and repentance of life.

But here's the catch: any hint that we might be getting somewhere with that kind of truth seems too good to be true. How can it possibly work? Where's the proof? That is exactly how Zacharias responded to the angel: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years" (Luke 1:18) When we have some glimmer that things actually might be improving in the world, that maybe the Lord might be changing things we never thought would change, we can all too easily respond with cynicism. Where's the proof that this time will be any different? We've seen this all before, how hope and expectation turn to disappointment and failure. The irony is that although on the one hand we hope and pray desperately for the Lord to do something, any hint that He actually might we reject out of hand as impossible.

The question for you, then, is do you truly believe that the Lord's pure, unadulterated truth can do the impossible? That it can come forth and change the world? That it can change you? If your answer is no, there's actually still hope: Zacharias's prayer was answered regardless of his doubt. In some ways it's impossible for us to fully believe the Lord's promises completely. The fact that you cannot does not make you a failure, any more than it made Zacharias one. That being said, Zacharias, because of his doubt, did suffer a consequence: he would not be able to speak until the child was born (see *Secrets of Heaven* §6988). Spiritual this muteness represents his inability to confess and declare to others faith in the Lord. And this makes sense: who are we to declare the Lord to other people when our own faith is shaky and in doubt? It is when the Lord's promises have been fulfilled that we can then joyfully share our faith in him with others.

In any case, in spite of Zacharias's doubt, his wife does indeed become pregnant. Even in his doubt the Lord is already secretly bringing about His promises.

Elizabeth keeps her pregnancy private for five months, as she quietly reflects on the Lord's work of granting her deep desire and removing her shame at being childless. This half of the equation is one that perhaps we neglect when we are losing hope: the cynical, doubting side takes centre stage, while the hope that the Lord is already planting within us or within the world is hidden away. What can you do to elevate the hope the Lord is showing you in answer to your prayers? What would it look like to embrace that hope instead of shying away from it? It won't mean seeing radical change: that only comes later in the story. But what are the signs that the Lord actually is at work in the world, the signs that His truth and commandments actually can change people, can change our country, can change our society, for the better? Or the glimmers within your own life that show you can, in fact, improve and become better than you were yesterday? Don't let doubt and cynicism obscure these little signs that the Lord gives you. They will grow into something bigger if you let them.

The story of Zacharias and Elizabeth prepares us for Christmas because it gives us hope in the Lord's coming. It presents an image of the possibilities that can begin to form when people, in their own small and seemingly insignificant ways, follow the Lord's commandments in a world and in a life that seems devoid of hope. It reassures us that if we continue prayerful turning to the Lord, He will offer comfort, in spite of our doubts about the future. The doubts are okay; as long as we persevere in living a good life. In the end, the Lord, unbeknownst to us, is already preparing a future and a hope, in the form of the Lord's presence, God with us, forever.