

Characters Of Christmas

Finding Spiritual Significance Among The Insignificant

An Expository Study of Select Gospel Texts

Written By

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The Bible is a book of graphic and highly personal inspired stories, carefully crafted, of course, to teach us everything from how mankind fell into sin to how godly people should live in various environments. Don't you love stories? God does and that's why from Genesis to Revelation there are so many of them. Stories inspire. Stories draw us into the lives of people. Stories help us visualize historical scenes, giving them high definition color so we can feel as if we are there seeing what others saw and experiencing what they encountered. Stories, in short, capture our hearts and minds, while inviting us to share in the moment so that we, too, can benefit and learn from the movement of God in time and space history.

Stories are divinely woven into the literary fabric of the Advent of the Messiah because of the reasons stated. What better way to arrest the attention of the reader? What smarter way to communicate the struggle between truth and error, God and the Devil, than this fashion? What a wonderful tool to employ to help people, some two thousand years after the fact, to not only read in wonder how the Messiah was born, but to find within those detailed accounts what He desires from us.

Pouring over these memorable and moving stories of the arrival of the promised Messiah, we certainly can't miss how God used insignificant, obscure, seemingly unimportant people to either usher in or welcome the birth of all births. In our last study, we learned how God used an old, feeble Jewish man to bring great prophetic praise to the parents of Jesus as they came to offer their new son to God at the temple. In this study, we back up in the Luke narrative to consider yet another opaque saint. His name? Zacharias. You'll find his exciting, instructive,

and amusing story written upon the parchment of Luke chapter 1. From a cursory reading of the text one concept quickly surfaces about this God fearing man:

Zacharias: He Prayed Up & Bugged Out (Luke 1:5-22)

Have you ever done that? I mean, have you ever prayed for something and then turned around and had a moment of great unbelief? We all have, and thanks be to God who is merciful and gracious toward us and committed to helping us mature in the faith. As we shall see, God worked through the spiritual frailty of this particular believer in order to use him to set the stage for the arrival of the Messiah. Trust me on this one: the same God is alive and well today and desires to work through us as well so we can accomplish His lofty purposes where the Messiah, Jesus, is concerned.

To dig into the rich soil of this story, I propose we do it in a different fashion than we typically do when addressing narrative. For our purposes, I suggest we divide it into its three episodic movements, while also analyzing its divine plot and attendant spiritual principles.

Episode #1: Family Facts (Luke 1:5-6)

The Plot: With these two foundational verses, Dr. Luke gives us the necessary background information from which he will build the suspense and conflict in the story so he can guide us to proper and timely spiritual truths we need to apply in our day:

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. ⁶ They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

From the outset, we see the spiritual struggle at the preparation for the coming of the Savior and Messiah, Jesus. The conflict disclosed here is between two types of men: Herod, the godless, haughty, cruel dictator of a king over Israel, and Zacharias, a godly, humble, and loving priest. They couldn't have been more different.

They both had one thing in common: old age. Herod was born in 74 B.C. and ruled over Israel from 37 to 4 B.C., which means he was at least in his late 60s in this part of Luke's story. Zacharias was also old, which is determined later in his statement that he and his wife are advanced in years. Interesting. Two old men who represented two types of men: one who rejected God and the coming Messiah, and one who embraced God and longed for the coming One. Which type of old man are you this Christmas?

Yet, despite sharing "old age" (depending on how you want to define the term), these two men were quite different in the eyes of God:

- One hated God, while the other loved God.
- One thought of himself, while the other thought of others.

- One worshipped himself, while the other worshipped God.
- One was untrustworthy, while the other was the epitome of trust.
- One had a proclivity for killing anyone who stood in the way of keeping his political power, even to the point of eliminating his wife, Mariamne, while the other was a devoted, loving husband.
- One had many wives (Doris, Mariamne I, Mariamne II, Malthace, Cleopatra of Jerusalem, Plassas, Phaedra, and Elpis ... plus two more whose names we don't know), while the other was faithful to just one his entire life, as God designed marriage.
- One was a false king of Israel, while the other was a true priest after the ancient priestly order of Abijah, the priest placed over the eight of twenty-four divisions for temple service first created by David (1 Chronicles 24:1-10).
- One, had many sons and no qualms about killing any who dared pose a threat to his tenuous throne (Alexander & Aristobulus who were executed in Sebaste, Samaria: Josephus, *Antiquities* xvi. 10:6-11:8), while the other just wanted one son.

Yes, the godly man, Zacharias, whose name means “the Lord has remembered,” had a full, blessed life in every respect; however, with regard to a coveted child, God had not seen fit to remember him, but had allowed barrenness to be part of his life and marriage. I'm sure there were many nights where he laid in bed wondering, “Lord, why have you not remembered Elizabeth and me where a baby is concerned?” Even the meaning of his wife's name, “God is an oath,” or “God is the absolutely reliable One,” I'm sure, caused them personal pause and pain as they lived in a home their whole married lives without the laughter, joy (and challenge) of a coveted child.

Now, as we read in verse 7, they were advanced in years, meaning they were very old. According to Wikipedia (the source of all knowledge on the internet, ☺), fertility peaks for a woman in her twenties, diminishes greatly after 35, and becomes almost impossible after the mid-40s and into the 50s. By a woman's 60s, the last thing she would ever think about is having a child. This family conflict, as with the conflict between Herod and Zacharias as men, was about to find the resolution of all resolutions as the plot is developed in the second episode. But before we head to the exciting section, let us stop and consider ...

The Principles: Several present themselves in these opening verses:

One, in times of great political, moral and spiritual darkness, God works to rise up voices in and through the most unassuming, obscure, and unknown people, people the world doesn't place a premium value on. In this context, those folks are senior citizens sold out to God and God's plans. It's a timeless story which is still applicable this Christmas.

Two, be faithful regardless of how God works or doesn't work in your life, because that is the calling of a saint. In Zacharias and Elizabeth we pick up no bitterness or anger at all. We just see obedience. Is this a picture of you this Christmas?

Three, never forget how God desires to use saints in tough, seemingly hopeless situations to be major players in advancing the message and meaning of the Messiah, Jesus. The physical, fertility situation of these two devoted saints couldn't have been direr, but God, in His sovereignty, specializes in doing His best work when it looks like things are not just

improbable, but highly impossible. Please, don't forget He just might surprise you, so hold tightly onto the hem of His holy garment.

From the gut-wrenching conflict of Episode #1, we turn to find joyous, jaw-dropping divine resolution, coupled with more, though unexpected, conflict.

Episode #2: Temple Time (Luke 1:7-20)

Shifting from personal details of the protagonists of the story, Dr. Luke ushers us into the core of



the story as it unfolded in the Temple. For those who are not up on the temple layout, here is a picture I took of the model of the Temple while in Israel in 2013. Hopefully, this will help you better understand just what happened to Zacharias, the priest.

The Plot: God will demonstrate in this narrative, through unexpected twists and turns, how He was quietly working through complex geo-political situations, and in the lives of insignificant, somewhat marginalized believers, to usher in the birth

of His Son and the Messiah, Jesus. Since it is a lengthy, meaty section, we shall better served to sub-divide it into four distinct sections:

- The Ritual (Luke 1:8-10). Luke masterfully draws us into the most amazing story regarding Zacharias and his service in the Temple:

⁸ Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

Twice a day, in the morning and the evening, priests were chosen by lot to attend to the altar of incense located in front of the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Incense, of course, represented the prayers of the priests and the saints as it ascended upwards (Psalm 141:2). What a beautiful image. Our prayers are like a sweet, smelling, ascending aroma before the throne of God.

Now, with 20,000 priests in Israel at the time, coupled with the fact that all priestly orders had to serve two weeks per year doing special daily service plus attend and help with Passover, Feast of Weeks, and Feast of Tabernacles, the odds of getting chosen by lot to actually enter the Holy Place were remote.¹ Also, since a priest could only do this privileged duty once in his life, this was the high point of the ministerial life of the old priest, Zacharias. *The lot falling on Zacharias on this particular day, after watching it fall on priests all around him his whole career, had nothing to*

¹ The lot may have been something like our dice: Numbers 26:52-56; 1 Samuel 10:20-24; 14:41-42.

do with chance and everything to do with divine providence (Proverbs 16:33). At a godless time, God worked in the most mysterious fashion in the life of an old, well-worn priest to accomplish His messianic purposes. Exciting, isn't it?

From the perspective of Zacharias, this was a high, holy privilege to walk into this Holy Place, but it was also a perpetual mundane ritual thousands of priests had performed from countless years. This time things were going to be way different, really, mind-blowing and mind-numbing.

- The Revelation (Luke 1:11). You can almost see Zacharias in your mind's eye.

R. Kent Hughes paints this part of the suspenseful story well:

Then came the moment to step into the Holy Place. Before him rose the richly embroidered curtain of the Holy of Holies, resplendent with cherubim woven in scarlet, blue, purple, and gold. To his left was the table of showbread. Directly in front of him was the horned golden altar of incense (Exodus 30:1-10; 37:25-29).²

Two attendants followed him in to the massive room: one carried live, red-hot coals from the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard. He placed them on the altar, while the other man gave the priest the golden incense censer. With that they both backed quietly out so the priest of the day could pray.

Charles Swindoll brings this part of the narrative to life in this fashion:

He stepped forward, poured the coals onto the altar and then covered them with a finely ground powder of spices and frankincense. A few moments later, he could barely see the blue, purple, and scarlet cherubim woven into the veil that hung between him and the Most Holy Place. As the smoky perfume rose to the nostrils of God, a faint breeze brushed the back of the old priest's neck, and for a moment, he felt certain he wasn't alone.³

He wasn't alone.

¹¹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

Effortlessly, an angel moved from his dimensionality to our dimensionality, making himself seen in all of his resplendent glory. Since orientation inside the Holy Place was figured based on looking out instead of in, the mighty angel stood just to the south of the incense altar, next to the flickering candlelight of the massive menorah. It had been over four hundred years since one of the beings had acted in this fashion, but this is typically what occurred when God was about to do something off the charts (Genesis 16:7-11; Exodus 3:2; Numbers 22:21-35; Judges 6:21; 13:20; 1 Samuel 3; Isaiah 6).

How did the old priest respond? Like you would have. I call it ...

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*. Preaching the Word. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998): 21-22.

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *A Bethlehem Christmas* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007): 19.

- The Rigidity (Luke 1:12).

¹² Zacharias was troubled when he saw *the angel*, and fear gripped him.

This is all an understatement. All of a sudden, Zacharias had what we might call in psychological circles, *angelphobia*. His phobia was mono-symptomatic because it was directly related to just one thing: the spectacular angel hovering in front of him. The hair on the back of his neck stood straight out. His heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest. His knees felt like two overcooked noodles. Here in front of him was a being like nothing his old, bi-focal needy eyes had ever seen. So he did what you'd do: he froze in fear.

- The Report (Luke 1:13-17). With great class and care, the angel did what angels do with God's people. They bring comfort and insight:

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. ¹⁴ "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. ¹⁶ "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 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, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

In Greek, the negative "do not" wedded to present tense verb "fear," *phobos* (φόβος) calls for an action then occurring to stop immediately. The angel assures Zacharias his prayer had been heard in heaven. What prayer? The prayer for him and Elizabeth to have a son one day. It's a hope he never gave up on, and when given the opportunity to prayer before the very presence of God, he didn't just pray for the nation of Israel, he asked God for a coveted child for he and his aged wife.

The angel joyously informed him that he and his wife would most assuredly have a son, but he'd be a son like no other. Again, this was the first prophecy from God after 400 years of prophetic silence. Their new son, John, whose Hebrew name Yohanan means "God has been gracious," would be a great man of God, a life-long Nazarite (Numbers 6) who'd not be controlled by wine by only by the Holy Spirit. Later, Jesus, the Messiah would say he was, next to Him, the greatest man ever born (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28).

Next, the angel prophesied about the impact of John's prophetic ministry. He would cause mass amounts of Israelites to worship the living God again, and he, above all other men, would be the sole forerunner of the Messiah, and he'd do his job with the power Elijah possessed in Old Testament times. Think of this. Zacharias asked for a boy, and God gave him a boy who'd fulfill the ancient prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 concerning the one who'd come to make the hearts of the nation ready for the arrival of the Messiah. What an answer to prayer! What a shock to the old priest! What a blessing from God for an ordinary, unknown, and obscure follower. Such are God's ways, especially as we consider the Christmas story.

Zacharias should have been beaming from ear to ear. He wasn't. With the next two verses we encounter a literary foil, or a twist in the story nobody would expect. Let's label it ...

- The Reversal (Luke 1:18-20).

¹⁸ Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this *for certain*? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

Are you kidding me? That is what Zacharias said? He should have said, "I am humbled. Praise be to God. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You can't believe how blessed I'm feeling right now."

On the contrary, Zacharias, who knew Old Testament stories of God helping barren people have children like Abraham and Sarah and Hannah and Elkanah (1 Samuel 1), simply retreated into complete unbelief, and in front of an amazing, glorious angel no less. He, who was divinely chosen to bring the Messiah's righteous forerunner to earth, bathed himself in unrighteousness as he bugged out in unbelief.

The angel wasn't amused:

¹⁹ The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."²⁰

Gulp. This was no run-o-the-mill angel (if there is such a thing, which I don't think there is), but Gabriel, the angel all Israelites new typically gave Israel insight into the divine path of the promise of the coming kingdom of the Messiah. The Greek is most emphatic, representing a verbal reprimand:

καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ ἄγγελος εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ἐγὼ εἰμι Γαβριήλ ὁ παρεστηκὼς ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ ...

Ego eimi is the first person personal pronoun followed by the first person present tense verb "to be." Wedded together it is like slamming your fist on a table and saying, I, I AM GABRIEL. The perfect tense participle, "the one standing" (ὁ παρεστηκὼς) denotes a perpetual nature of his unique angelic job. He doesn't move in and out of God's presence at his will, but he stands right in front of Him for the large part of his duties; therefore, if any angel should be listened to and believed, it is him. He had come directly from God with an amazing message for this obscure, opaque priest. By definition, this message should have been immediately embraced with unflinching, inexorable faith. Since it wasn't, discipline must follow.

"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, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

Interesting. The mouth which got Zacharias into trouble, will be the point of temporary judgment. Further, from the fact verse 62 says the people had to make signs to communicate with him suggest he was also deaf. Poetic judgment. The ears who failed to really listen to God would, along with the mouth, have nine months to think about their unbelief in the face of

overwhelming evidence of God at work through the presence of the angel Gabriel. The plot has certainly turned in a direction none could have anticipated, but such is walk of the saint as he comes near the ways of God. All of this leads us, of course, to move from plot to life principles, especially at this Christmas season.

The Principles. Again, there are many we can glean from this spectacular story:

One, can and will work through one insignificant couple with not much more than their righteousness and reputations going in their favor to turn a nation around. Such is the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth God gave them a miracle son who wasn't just a son, but John the Baptist. Through his preaching and teaching, he single-handedly prepared the hearts and minds of his fellow Israelites for the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus, the Savior and Messiah. All of this makes we wonder this Christmas, "What miraculous work will God do in your life to cause you and your family to make an impact on our culture like never before?" "What will your child do?" "What door will God open for you as a single, as a divorcee, as a college student?"

Two, the next time you are overcome with your life and world situation, just remember that God's angelic messengers are ever so close to us, working hard to carry on the message of John and Jesus. There are always Herod-types, evil people committed to living for themselves and melting down everything and everyone around them, but, then, there are also godly-types who realize that angels of God are with us, making sure that one day the Kingdom of the Messiah will come as prophesied and promised by God.

Three, don't meet God's revelation with your revulsion. Put differently, we who have the revelation of the entire Christmas story before us every year, we who know its miraculous nature, we who can read about how God wove many loose ends together in countless ordinary lives to bring the Savior to our doorstep, we, of all people, should be motivated by joyous, glowing belief. We should be excited that angels are close to us. We should be excited that God is at work in the seen and unseen worlds even though it may not appear as such. We should be excited that He who came the first time from heaven with great wonder and glory, it, in fact, coming again as the King of Kings. The story of Zacharias really hits home, doesn't it, because we can all too readily identify with getting all prayed up and then bugging out at the first sign of something unusual happening in our lives or church. Oh, Lord, help us to be people of great faith, faith that the babe of Bethlehem was and is the Messiah and the Savior of all mankind. And, Lord, let our faith forge us into being great saints of God like John.

Turning from this all-instructive second Episode, we conclude our study by taking a quick look at ...

Episode #3: Courtyard "Chat" (Luke 1:21-22)

Don't tell me the Scripture is boring. I love this last entry by Dr. Luke about the story of the old priest who ran into an ancient angel:

²¹ The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute.

The Plot: One more time, the story takes a turn we and the ancient worshippers didn't expect. For years, priests went into the Holy Place, dropped incense on the altar of incense, said a few prayers and then exited quickly. That didn't happen with Zacharias. As the people waited outside in the courtyard to him to come out and pronounce the typical blessings on them, he was nowhere in sight. Ten minutes. No Zacharias. Fifteen minutes. No Zacharias. Thirty minutes. No Zacharias. No priest had ever stayed in the Holy Place that long. Don't you know they talked among themselves, "Do you think he had a stroke? No, maybe it was a heart attack? Who is going to go in there and get him? Did he trip, fall down and knock himself out?"

Finally ... and slowly ... Zacharias emerged, looking like he had seen a ghost. I'm sure he could see all of them talking but he couldn't hear a thing they were saying, so he started making all kinds of signs to describe what had just happened. I would have loved to have seen that. How do you go about doing a pantomime of an angelic encounter? Where do you start?

Eventually, the confused crowd dispersed and went home. Eventually, Zacharias went home too. What happened next let them know that God had, indeed, not forgotten them nor His plan to bring the Messiah to earth:

²³ When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. ²⁴ After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, ²⁵ "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked *with favor* upon *me*, to take away my disgrace among men."

Two ordinary, obscure believers, well into their old age, lived to learn that God would use even them, even when one of them temporarily bugged out with unbelief, to do their part in getting the world ready for the Messiah. It's a story which still rings true this Christmas.

The same God who remembered them, remembers you and your life issues which seem to hamstring you for greater spiritual work for His kingdom ... and He stands ready to give you new, fresh insight into the revelatory nature of the Christmas story so you, too, can prepare the way for the Messiah.