

### 3. Two surprise birth announcements

October 4, 2015

An Italian, a Scotsman and a Chinese fellow are hired at a construction site. The foreman points out a huge pile of sand and says to the Italian guy, "You're in charge of sweeping." To the Scotsman he says, "You're in charge of shoveling." And to the Chinese guy, "You're in charge of supplies." He, then, says, "Now, I have to leave for a little while. I expect you guys to make a big dent in that pile."

So the foreman goes away for a couple hours and when he returns, the pile of sand is untouched. He asks the Italian, "Why didn't you sweep any of it?" The Italian replies, "Mama mia, I no hava no broom. You saida to the Chinese a fella that he a wasa in a charge of supplies, but he hasa disappeared and I no coulda finda him nowhere." Then the foreman turns to the Scotsman and says, "And you, I thought I told you to shovel this pile." The Scotsman replies, "Aye, ye did, lad. Boot ah couldnay get meself a shoovel! Ye left th' Chinese gadgie in chairge of supplies, boot ah couldnay fin' him either."

The foreman is really angry now and storms off toward the pile of sand to look for the Chinese guy. Just then, the Chinese guy leaps out from behind the pile of sand and yells, "SUPPLIES!"

Life is full of surprises. More than that, God is full of surprises! He has a history of pulling off surprises to mankind. When we think that we just figure out what God would do, He completely blows away our expectation and logic.

The best example of that is salvation through Jesus Christ who was born in a humanity with full of divinity. It was the best kept secret. Even though it was prophesied throughout the entire OT, no one, even satan couldn't figure it out until it was too late for him to stop it.

An old couple and a Jewish teenager girl were about to face God's incredible plan and they didn't know that they were the supporting roles of His unbelievable real life drama.

#### A. ZACHARIAS THE DOUBTING BELIEVER

*Luke 1:5-10 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. 8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.*

For 400 years the Lord didn't speak to Israel through any of His prophets of the OT after prophet Malachi. There was absolute silence from heaven and it was truly dark days for the Jews, because their spiritual leaders put themselves in bondage to their religious tradition and corruption over their God. But no matter how dark the day, God always has His devoted and obedient people.

Among those godly and devoted people, there were elderly Zacharias and Elizabeth. They both belonged to the priestly line, but they did not have children. I am sure that they made this a matter of constant prayer. Little did they know that God was about to answer their prayers and give them, not a priest, but a prophet. And no ordinary prophet, because their son would be the herald of the coming Messiah.

In Zacharias' time, the priesthood bulged with more than 20,000 priests that they divided into 24 divisions. Each division was on duty twice a year, for a week on each occasion. Since there were so many, they had to use the lot to determine which priests would serve which particular duty and when. To a godly man like Zacharias, burning incense at the Golden Altar of Incense would be the biggest event of his life, a tremendous privilege, a-once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

As he walked into the Holy Place, in front of him was the Golden Altar of Incense. It was 18 inches square and 3 feet high. On that small table lay the burning coals, with little wisps of smoke rising up, ready for the incense. Behind the Golden Altar was a huge, thick curtain, and behind that curtain was the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place, where no man could enter, except the high priest, and that only on the Day of Atonement. As he faced the Golden Altar of Incense, to his right would be the Table of Showbread, and to his left would be the Golden Lampstand, which provided the only light in the Holy Place. In the Bible the burning of incense is a strong picture of prayer.

## **B. GABRIEL THE ANGEL**

*Luke 1:11-17 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 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. 14 And 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 shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 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."*

There are innumerable angels, but only two of which are actually named in Scripture: Michael the Archangel and this Gabriel. When Gabriel appeared by the altar, Zacharias was frightened, because to the Jews, the angel's appearance could have meant a divine judgment.

I really doubt that the angel Gabriel was a fat naked baby angel with tiny wings. The angels in the Bible are glorious, fearful, and awesome creatures. Like most angels in the Bible, the first thing this angel had to say to his human contact was "Do not be afraid." It was the first commandment after 400 years of silence from God.

Gabriel instructed Zacharias to name his son 'John' which means "Jehovah is gracious" and to dedicate the boy to God to be a Nazarite all of his life. He would be filled with the Spirit before birth and would be God's prophet to present His Son to the people of Israel. God would use John's ministry to turn many people back to the Lord. What an awesome assignment that was!

The pattern for John the Baptist's ministry would be the great prophet Elijah, and he would go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah, not Elijah himself. Elijah was a man who called Israel to a radical repentance. This quotation is from Malachi 4:5-6.

*Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."*

Zacharias has been praying for the salvation of his nation Israel and a son for themselves. God is going to answer both prayer requests in a surprising manner.

### **C. A PRIEST WITHOUT FAITH**

*Luke 1:18-25 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. 20 But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." 21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. 22 But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. 23 And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. 24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, 25 "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."*

Zacharias came into the temple to pray to God Almighty who created heaven and earth with commands. But he couldn't believe that the same God could make his aging wife to be pregnant. "How absurd!" we might say. But like Zacharias, we, too, can limit God's capability in the backwash of our own unbelief. Listen, unbelief is when we intentionally refuse to believe God's Word and do what He tells us to do.

Zacharias received a sign, all right – not the kind he expected. His words of unbelief stuck in his throat, until the day he would name his newborn son. He had an encounter with an angel and great news for a coming son, yet he could not let others know, because he couldn't speak. It is far worse than you hit a golf ball and it became a hole in one, but there is not a soul around to brag about.

### **D. A FAITHFUL MAIDSERVANT OF ISRAEL**

*Luke 1:26-38 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" 29 But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. 30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. 33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." 34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How*

*can this be, since I do not know a man?" 35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. 37 For with God nothing will be impossible." 38 Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

Nazareth was a village seventy miles north of Jerusalem. It was a tough town, known for its corruption and low morals due to the Roman soldiers' garrison. When we visited it 11 years ago, I didn't consider visiting Nazareth as the highlight of our Holy Land tour. Currently Nazareth is known as "the Arab capital of Israel." The population is made up predominantly of Arab citizens of Israel.

Mary was a Jewish young woman of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, and a virgin. She was engaged to a carpenter in Nazareth named Joseph, and apparently both of them were poor. Among the Jews at that time, the engagement was almost as binding as marriage and could be broken only by divorce. In fact, the man and the woman were called "husband" and "wife" even before the marriage took place. Since Jewish girls married young, it is likely that Mary was a teenager when the angel appeared to her.

Mary's response reveals her humility and honesty before God. She certainly never expected to see an angel and receive special favors from heaven. If she thought that she was special, she might have said, "Well, it's about time, Gabby! What took you so long?" No, all of this was certainly a surprise to her.

Being pregnant before a young lady's wedding may not be a big deal to many nowadays, but it could be a lifelong accusation or even a death penalty as an adulteress if the groom had nothing to do with it like this.

In v31-35, we must make a special note for ourselves, because this doesn't have the same impact on us today. But Mary and all the other Jewish people from her culture knew exactly what this meant. This Child would be equal to God by being called the Son of God. Please pay attention to this: Jesus did not become the Son of God. He was called the Son of God, recognizing His divine nature from all eternity.

Mary's question was logical. Even though she asked basically the same question Zacharias asked. His question was asked in skeptical unbelief requesting a sign, her question was asked in wonder-filled faith about the process.

Angel Gabriel explained that the power of the Highest, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, would overshadow Mary. The Greek word for 'overshadow' is "episkiazō" and it means "to cover with a cloud," like the cloud of Shekinah glory in the temple of the OT or the cloud of transfiguration Peter, James and John saw in the Mt. Hermon.

Mormon people claimed that this is when God had sex with Mary and she was pregnant with Jesus. That is a flat out crude and perverted theology. But then again, it is not surprising to know what the Mormon doctrine says about this, because the founder of Mormon Joseph Smith was a well-documented sex-obsessed philanderer.

Mary responds with humility and firm faith in God in spite of inevitable false accusations and potential death penalty. What courage and faith this young girl had!

Speaking of courage, nine people were killed when a gunman opened fire at Umpqua Community College in Oregon last Thursday. The gunman asked the people about their religion. If they were Christians, he shot them in the head. In my opinion, the bravest person in the United States was the second person who admitted to being a Christian after the murderer shot the first. Can you be courageous enough to stand for what you believe?

### ***E. APPLICATIONS***

- 1) If we think God has run out of surprises, we could be in for the surprise of our lives.
- 2) We should not limit God's ability just because we cannot imagine.
- 3) Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but pray that we may be fearless when we are facing them.