

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

The word "angel" has its origins in a different word. In the Hebrew and Greek language, the word was more formally something like "herald" or more as we would say it, "messenger". Sometimes this word would be used to describe anyone who came with a message from someone else. They were a mouthpiece for a message sent from far away. Sometimes these messages and messengers were from the Lord. In English we've created our own word from these that only means a messenger from God; an angel. But in the language of the Bible, that wasn't always clear. So when you read "Angel of the Lord" in English, that wasn't as redundant in the original as it would be for us. It would read more like "Messenger of the Lord".

The point is that these creations of God were there to speak his word to the people who needed to hear it. And they appeared only when God had something very important to say. In the New Testament era, after a period of silence from God of nearly 400 years, there is a veritable flurry of communication from our God using his messengers. So tonight, we take a look at the first of these communications from that time, the angel that appeared to Zechariah at the temple.

Since the Jews had returned from exile, life had gone on for the Jewish nation. But suddenly, things were changing. God had appointed a man that would go on ahead of the Messiah to "warm up the crowd" as it were. To get them to understand the need for repentance and the need for the coming Savior. The two would be contemporaries, conceived and born around the same time, with the forerunner being just a little earlier.

And so God sent a messenger to Zechariah to let him know exactly what was coming. After calming him with the initial, "Do not be afraid," that so many meetings with angels start with, did you notice the odd sort of way the angel begins this announcement? He doesn't start with the news about what's coming with the Messiah or even that he was going to participate in this event in some small way through his coming son. That stuff all comes out of course, but notice how the angel begins: "Zechariah, your prayer has been heard."

These are words of comfort and relief to any of God's people who have needed deliverance from their troubles. Zechariah had no son, no heir, no children at all. And in his culture, for reasons I won't get into now, that was a bigger problem than it would be today. Zechariah had perhaps given up hope, humanly speaking, that this would ever happen. He and his wife were old, older than necessary for a natural birth. But apparently he had not given up hope in God. He prayed that this might yet be changed. And God heard his prayer. So God chose to answer Zechariah's prayer at the same time that he prepared the forerunner of the Christ.

Our prayers to God can take much the same shape, can't they? Let's be honest, most of the prayers we send are for help. We have a problem and we want God to deliver us! And that's okay, we should pray to God about these things. He wants us to call upon him in the day of trouble. He wants us to bring him requests and petitions about anything and everything. And I'm here to remind you of one basic truth: your prayer has been heard.

God listens to his children. The very Savior whose coming we're about to celebrate made that possible. Only the righteous can approach God's throne in prayer. And by Christ, who lived and died in your place, you are made righteous in God's eyes. When you come to him in prayer he sees you as Christ has made you, a perfect and innocent child to whom he can devote his full attention when you speak. As a dear father listens to his dear children, so our God always listens to us.

But, that doesn't mean God always does exactly what we want either. No doubt Zechariah had probably wanted a son a little earlier in life. A father listens to his children's problems, but that doesn't mean he always takes their advice in solving them. We may think the solution to the bully that picks on us is to have our Dad go beat him up; but that's not really the best course of action. So our Father, in wisdom far beyond ours, works in his own way at his own time. But let's never mistake that for thinking that God isn't listening or even worse, that God simply isn't able or doesn't want to help.

We see that attitude in Zechariah here. His question to the angel is obviously not a humble request but is spoken in doubt, in unbelief. This is not Abraham marveling at the power of God, this is Sarah laughing at the entrance to the tent. Zechariah had an angel of the Lord assure him of the Lord's own words and he questioned it. The apostle James tells us that the person who prays in doubt should not expect to receive anything from God. To think that God might not listen or that God can't or doesn't want to help you, that is to question the very nature of God and what he has done for you through Christ.

When we find ourselves gripped with such destructive attitudes we should echo the prayer of the apostles, "Lord we do believe, help us overcome our unbelief!"

And that sin will be forgiven as well. Because of what was set in motion by Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah, and the announcements to come that we'll look at in the next weeks. By Jesus. All of our prayers for help to God are specific echoes of the prayer he taught us himself, "Deliver us from evil." And by Jesus he answers that prayer permanently. John would go ahead of Jesus, make the paths straight, and prepare hearts for the Savior. And Jesus would right the wrongs of Eden, pay your price and make your eternal deliverance possible.

Remember that when you pray for help. Our Father helps. God hears your prayer. And when you ask to be delivered from evil he has already answered that prayer in the greatest and best way possible. He sent his son to rescue you from eternal death. By Jesus you will be delivered from all evil permanently. This is the promise and comfort he gives us in tough times now. And whatever trouble he can spare us in the meantime, he will. God has no desire to see you suffer. Whatever he asks you to endure, he only does so that you or someone else can permanently escape evil by being brought to and strengthened in faith.

We live in a world of trouble. We regularly need God's help. Pray to him. Speak with him. As a messenger of God I assure you; your prayer has been heard. Amen.