

Zechariah: A Visit From An Angel

Luke 1:5-23

All their lives together they had prayed for a child, at least one. But a child never came, and now Zechariah and his wife were old, well past child-bearing age. But that yearning and that old pain was still there, still haunting them, still finding its way into their prayers, even though human reasoning said it was out of the question. It seemed that their prayers always went nowhere—but the pain remained.

When was the last time you went through a particularly painful period in your life? When was the last time you needed to hear God's voice, and you needed to hear it quickly? When was the last time you prayed to God and it seemed that your prayers went nowhere? When was the last time you urgently needed a message from God, but you did not seem to get it?

Our lives are influenced by so many other things and people, that it is now more important than ever for Christian people to be able to hear God's voice and to clearly understand God's message.

What does it take for us to know God's will? Do you think a visit from an angel would make any difference to you today? God will not always speak to us in dramatic ways, nor will He always use an angel. Many times He speaks to us in the ordinary events of our days; the problem is that we do not always hear Him! But from the story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, we learn three important things about what God has to say, and how we can be sure to hear it in our day.

This is what we can do to make sure we hear what God is saying:

1 Prepare for it, v. 6

Zechariah was prepared, as prepared as any one person could be, to receive God's message. He was righteous before God, as the Scriptures say, and he was blameless before men. Notice that the Scriptures do not say that Zechariah was sinless, just that he was blameless. He probably had many friends, and was respected by others. He was careful in his life to do those things that were pleasing to God. He had been very careful in marrying a woman who was also of the same lineage, that of a priestly lineage. Both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth could trace their ancestry back to the very first high priest, Aaron, the brother of Moses.

So Zechariah was a priest, and he was married to the daughter of a priest. That was a double honor. But this couple was careful in their obedience to God in other ways, and in other areas of life. They followed God. They loved God with all their hearts. They served God as best they could. Zechariah lived his life according to the commandments of God.

He was prepared for God's message to come to him. He was the type of person who lived his entire life in joyful and patient expectation that God was about to do something grand, something that the world had never seen, yet something that would bring joy to everyone. The people of Israel had not heard directly from God for over 400 years, yet Zechariah stayed ready to serve God in any way that he could.

He was always prepared to hear what God had to say. And so God spoke to him. Zechariah's preparation for God's message and will was something that went further than mere promises made in an emotional moment. His preparation was something that went deep down to the depths of his being; it was a part of his character.

In verse six, we read that both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth "*were upright in the sight of God,*" which describes their character. In verse eight, we read that Zechariah was serving as priest "*before God,*" which there describes Zechariah's work. Whatever he did, he did before God. Wherever he went, he was before God.

You and I often cannot hear God's voice speaking to us today because we do not stay prepared to hear God's voice. Oftentimes God may try to speak to us, but we are not listening. We are too busy, too preoccupied, or even too busy "serving" Him, to listen to what God's message really is. We have our own lives to live, or so we say.

There may be times when we think we are prepared to hear God's voice. There may be a time of tragedy in our lives, and so we try to find out what God's will is. We make a lot of promises to God, that we'll do this or that if only God will hear our prayers and help us out of this trouble we're in. At other times, perhaps at the first of a new year, we make resolutions that we're going to be better people, that we are going to read our Bibles more, pray more, be more faithful in church attendance, and we might even go so far as to say that we'll witness for Christ more than we have.

But just making a lot of promises to God does not mean that we are ready to hear God's voice. Even going through the motions, and actually doing all that we've promised to God, does not mean that we are prepared to receive God's message. What would it take for us to get ready to hear God speaking to us today? A visit from an angel?

No, some of us are so set in our ways, and others of us have our hearts so hardened with sin and with a lack of concern, that if an angel *did* appear to us today to give us God's message, we would probably write him off as just a quack, or as someone who was just trying to make a fast dollar. And even if we did believe it was really an angel, our promises to God and our obedience to His will would not last very long.

There are some people in our world today who, if they were to see an angel this afternoon, would not be prepared to receive the message. And they would not be prepared because they do not live their lives as "*before God.*" They do not try to please God at all times. God's voice would fall upon them and bounce off as though they were deaf. And spiritually, they really are. May that never be true of me! May it never be true of you!

There's a story that once the archangel Michael was standing next to the throne of God, listening with God to all the prayers that rose from the earth. In a continuous torrent, all the prayers, oral and sung, of mankind were rising from the earth. It was a babble of sound in all tongues, and on all sides of every question. There were passionate demands, whining pleas, and requests for special favors.

Overwhelmed with it all, Michael said to God, "If you will excuse me, Lord, I would say that You made a great mistake when You let man learn to talk. If he was not able to talk, it would be possible then for You to know what he was really praying for." And God said, "I do not listen to their words. I listen only to their lives."

If you want to know God's will for your life, if you have a prayer that seems to go unanswered, you'll hear God's message when you prepare for it. You'll hear God's message when your life is right with God, when your spirit and God's Spirit are one, when your lifestyle is in conformity to the lifestyle of Christ. God's message comes to those whose lives are prepared to receive it.

2 Ask for it, v. 13

Zechariah had evidently prayed about the fact that he and his wife were childless. In the Hebrew culture they believed that if you were childless that meant that you were out of favor with God. It was a reason for public disgrace. And through the years, Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed over and over again that God would hear their prayers and would bless them with a child.

But now the situation was doubly hopeless, for not only did Elizabeth continue to be barren, but now they were both beyond the normal ages of child-bearing. Yet from all indications, Zechariah did not stop praying.

There were so many men who were of the priestly lineage that they had to be divided into 24 divisions. Zechariah was of the priestly division of Abijah. Each division served for two periods of one week each, performing the duties in the Temple at Jerusalem. The different duties were assigned by lot, and this particular time the lot fell to Zechariah, that he should enter the Temple and burn incense to God.

It is believed that at this particular time in Israel's history, there were approximately 20,000 priests, so such a privilege as burning incense at the altar might fall on any given priest no more than once in his entire lifetime.

Here on this once in a lifetime opportunity, Zechariah went into the holy place to burn incense for the people of Israel, for forgiveness of sins. Now, since the Hebrews were under Roman rule, it is very likely that Zechariah prayed for the coming of the Messiah while he was in the holy place performing this sacred duty. But it is not at all improbable that he prayed also for a child, because in verse 13, the angel appeared to Zechariah and said, *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.”*

God's message came to Zechariah because he asked for it. He repeatedly had sought God's face for a message concerning a child for him and Elizabeth.

And God's message will come to us today if we are just as faithful in prayer as Zechariah was. We may not have to wait until we are very old for God to answer, but we *might*. But no matter when, we are to be faithful in praying to God that we might hear what He has to tell us. We shouldn't become impatient and try to take things into our own hands whenever God appears to be slow in answering our prayers.

Too many times we don't even bother to ask God for a message for our lives. We just seem to think that we can handle it all by ourselves. And then, when we've made a mess of things, it's so easy for us to cast our eyes heavenward and throw all the blame on God for the trouble we're in. And we wonder why God didn't help us, but the answer is that we just did not ask!

There's a little poem I discovered years ago that addresses this very thing:

*When we look to man for help,
We get the help of man.
When we trust society,
We get its tangled plan.
When we depend upon
ourselves,*

*Our impotence shows through.
But when in faith we turn to
prayer,
We get what God can do.*

(Viola Jacobson Berg)

The Bible gives us a clear word about our asking of God in prayer: *“And this is the confidence we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him”* (1 John 5:14-15, RSV).

What will it take before we begin asking God for His message for our lives and our church? What will it take a visit from an angel? We might think that would solve all our problems about knowing God's will and message. But it wouldn't! We would ask the angel what God's will is, and he would tell us. But before long, unless we kept on asking, we would soon forget all about it and go back to life the way it was before.

No, having a visit from an angel might sound nice, and it might sound thrilling, but a visit from an angel would not necessarily help us know God's will and would not necessarily cause us to hear God's voice. God's message is made known to us when we are prepared for it, and when we are consistent in asking for it.

3 When we listen for it, vv. 8-11

Zechariah had not come to the Temple to be seen by others, or even to see who else was there. He had not come because he had been forced to, even though it was his duty, or because he would have felt guilty if he didn't come.

We would imagine that when Zechariah found out that the lot had fallen on him to enter into the holy place and burn incense for the nation, that he went through a

period of soul-searching and self-examination, making sure that he was spiritually qualified to intercede for the people that way.

He was prepared to receive God's message. He was asking for a knowledge of God's will and had been asking for it for a long time. But all that preparation and all that asking would have been absolutely worthless in knowing what God wanted if Zechariah had not been listening for God's voice and message in the first place.

When we look at verses 8-11, there is one thing that stands out above everything else: Zechariah was not out on the hillside when he heard God's voice. He was not in the streets of the city. Zechariah was in the Temple when God's message came to him, waiting on God. His attitude was like that found in the book of Isaiah, "*O Lord, be gracious to us; we long for you. Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress*" (Isaiah 33:2). He was prepared, he was asking, he was listening.

You and I so often miss hearing God's message to our church and to our lives, because we do not listen! We may pray, sure, but we never give God a chance to speak back to our hearts. We need to realize that prayer is a two-way communication; we pray to God, and then we get silent, and allow God to speak to us, to reveal to us what His will and purpose is.

And a lot of times we've already made up our minds before we even pray to God. We just go through the motions to make it look good before everyone else, or because we are supposed to at least ask God if what we're doing is okay. We do not ask God seriously, and as a consequence, we do not listen to what God has to say in return. We don't hear His message because we're simply not listening.

God may have been trying for a long time to get through to you, to show you something of Himself, to let you know how much He loves you, to show you what His plan is. And unless you listen to God, you won't hear what He has to say to you.

We may often wish that a message from God would come to us. Zechariah wished that for a long time, and one day that message, straight from God, came to him.

It came to Zechariah because he was prepared. His life was one lived before God. If you are searching for God's will, are you prepared to receive what He tells you?

God's message came to Zechariah because he asked for it. He was consistent in his asking. If you and I are to know God's message and will for our lives, we must take time to ask Him what He has to tell us.

But then, God's message came to Zechariah because he listened for it. He was in the Temple, and he was listening for God's voice. You and I will know what God's will is and we'll hear His message when we listen for it. And here at Christmas time, I can't think of a better, more fitting way to celebrate the birth of our Savior than by getting our hearts ready, asking God to speak to us, and then listening for His voice.

What will it take before we hear God's message? a visit from an angel?