

International Bible Lessons Commentary

Luke 1:8-20

New Revised Standard Version

International Bible Lessons

Sunday, December 18, 2016

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The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, December 18, 2016**, is from **Luke 1:8-20**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** discusses *Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further* to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

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Luke 1:8-20

(Luke 1:8) Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty,

Thousands of priests (all priests had to be members of the Tribe of Levi) were divided into twenty-four divisions or courses, and each division would provide temple services one week at a time. The name Zechariah means "the Lord remembers": the Lord would remember His covenant with Israel to send the Messiah/Redeemer. Through Zechariah and John the Baptist, God showed that He remembered before He sent the Messiah.

(Luke 1:9) he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

Because there were so many priests, they were chosen by lot (see Leviticus 8:8 and 1 Samuel 28:6), which indicated they were chosen by God (a great honor for any priest); furthermore, priests were allowed to burn incense in the temple only once in their lifetime. The Holy of Holies was entered only once a year by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. Zechariah would enter the sanctuary or Holy Place immediately outside

the Holy of Holies in order to burn incense on the altar of incense. He could never enter the Holy of Holies because he was never a High Priest.

(Luke 1:10) Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

The incense offering was brought in the morning and in the afternoon (about 3:00 pm). The worshipers prayed in the outer temple court when they saw the incense burning. When they saw the incense burning, there would be silence throughout the temple. During this time, the priest and the people would consecrate themselves to the Lord and pray for the Messiah to come as well as other prayers.

(Luke 1:11) Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

For 400 years, God had not spoken to the people through a prophet, and as far as we know no angels had appeared to anyone either. During this once in a lifetime experience of burning incense in the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah at the place of honor, on the right side of the altar of incense.

(Luke 1:12) When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

Zechariah's response was similar to the reports of others in the Bible who had the blessed experience of an angelic visitation. Certainly, most people would be startled to see an angel dressed in heavenly clothing standing suddenly in front of them as they were praying, and no matter how much we think we are good people our first thoughts would probably include a questioning fear at the unexpected appearance of an angel.

(Luke 1:13) But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."

The angel's first endeavor was to quiet Zechariah's fears. Zechariah did not bow down to worship the angel. Before he and his wife had greatly passed childbearing age, they must have prayed almost without ceasing for a child, but his prayer in the temple probably related to the coming of the Messiah to save Israel. In any event, God answered their prayers for a son and for the coming of the Messiah. The name Elizabeth means, "My God is absolutely faithful." Their prayers for a son and the coming of the Messiah were both answered because Zechariah was to prepare Elizabeth for the birth of their son, and John was to prepare the way for Jesus. The name John means, "God's gracious gift."

(Luke 1:14) You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

God blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth by promising and giving them a son who no doubt brought them joy and delight. They were the perfect spiritual parents for John as they were both righteous before God, and their son would preach righteousness and repentance to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah (see Luke 1:5-6). Many rejoiced at John's birth and they were amazed when Zechariah could speak again after the birth of John. Later, many believers rejoiced at John's preaching; they confessed their sins, repented, and prepared to meet Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

(Luke 1:15) for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

John was great in the sight of the people who heard him preach and believed his message; far more importantly, John was great in the sight of the Lord – the aspiration of many believers. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born (the only person in the Bible who received this blessing); therefore, he did not need and was forbidden to drink wine or other fermented drinks for stimulation. The Holy Spirit would give John courage and power, direct his emotions, and lead his thinking and speaking. The Holy Spirit gave him the eternal joys that no fermented drink ever could.

(Luke 1:16) He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

The Old Testament shows how the people of Israel and their leaders practiced sin repeatedly, and how God sent prophets to call them to repent and turn back to obeying God and His laws. Heeding some of their prophets' calls, they obeyed God's law for a while, and then they turned back to their sinful ways. Like the prophets of old, John would call God's people to return to God, but with the additional message that they should prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah, the Lamb of God. He succeeded because he was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born, and God's Spirit worked through him.

(Luke 1:17) With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

God sent John to fulfill the words of the last prophet before him: “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,

says the LORD Almighty” (Malachi 3:1). By referring Zechariah back to the Old Testament prophets, the angel confirmed that John was the fulfillment of their prophecies and the expectations of God’s people: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction” (Malachi 4:5-6). Jesus taught in the temple as Malachi foretold. Jesus made a new covenant in His blood as Malachi foretold. Jesus also said that John fulfilled this prophecy when He came: “Jesus replied, ‘To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands’” (Matthew 17:11-12). After Jesus’ apostles and evangelists preached in Judea about forty years with many coming to faith in Jesus the Messiah, but with the rulers and many others in Jerusalem continuing to persecute Jesus’ followers, the prophecy of Malachi was fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in 70 AD — the “great and dreadful day of the LORD” finally came. Because they refused to repent and believe, Israel was struck “with total destruction.” For the people who believed, repented of their sins, and returned to obeying God, families were healed and the repentant understood and followed the wisdom of the righteous that they had repudiated before. In these and other ways, they were prepared for the coming of Jesus the Messiah, and believers still do these things today as they look forward to Jesus’ Second Coming.

(Luke 1:18) Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

Under the pressure of the moment, Zechariah did not remember the facts surrounding the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age or the birth of Samuel to Elkanah and Hannah. The startling presence of the angel was insufficient evidence, and Zechariah wanted assurance that this angel he met in the temple spoke the truth to him!

(Luke 1:19) The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

The angel Gabriel “stood” in the presence of God – think of that honor! He was speaking a message from God, and God would hold him accountable to deliver His message. God deemed Gabriel faithful or He would never have honored him so. The Bible teaches us about angels and how they serve God and us (see 2 Kings 6:17 and Matthew 18:10). In the Bible, only two angels are mentioned by name: Gabriel and Michael, and they each have different roles or responsibilities (see Daniel 8:16, 9:21, and Luke 1:19, 26) and (see Daniel 10:13, 21, 12:1, Jude 9, Revelation 12:7).

(Luke 1:20) But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

The sign Gabriel gave was proof of his words and also the discipline of the Lord for Zechariah’s demanding proof that this could be done in his old age when God had done this before with the birth of Isaac and Samuel as the Scriptures testified. The sign also could be demonstrated to others that Zechariah had experienced something unusual (to say the least) in the temple. Zechariah was supposed to bless the people when he came out of the holy place, but he could not speak; therefore, they knew something unusual had happened to him in the sanctuary. And when he went home, he could not speak until after John was born. As a trained priest, he could write down his experiences for Elizabeth and others to read. The angel’s words came true with the birth of John the Baptist.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why was it so special for Zechariah to serve in the temple and burn incense in the Holy Place?
2. What did the worshipers and Zechariah do when Zechariah burned the incense?
3. What was special about Gabriel?
4. How were Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth similar, but different from Mary?
5. How were John and Jesus different from everyone born before and after them? What responsibilities did God want each of them to fulfill?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.
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