

I. Introduction:

A. The first installment of J.R.R. Tolkien's book, *The Hobbit*, came out as a film late last year. It tells the story of Bilbo Baggins, a small inhabitant of Middle Earth, who finds a magic ring that everyone is killing each other over. This ring becomes the focal point of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy that follows, in which Frodo, Bilbo's nephew – and one of three Christ-figures – gives his life to destroy it. What many people do not know is that while *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy occurs over a one year period, that single year is preceded by thousands upon thousands of years of history. In painstaking detail in *The Hobbit* and two other books, *Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*, Tolkien invented entire languages and genealogies and races and cultural histories for the inhabitants of Middle Earth.¹ He did this not because it was necessary, but because it helped provide context for the story, and because this is what The Bible does!

B. In one sense, the events we focus on as Christ followers are not simply limited to Christ's life, or even the last three years of it, they are confined to one critical week. But there are thousands of years of context – genealogies and back stories, people, lessons, prophetic announcements – to help us see it in context, to help us appreciate God's hand in bringing it all about and to make it very clear that everything ultimately pivots around the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

C. Well, one part of the biblical back-story – one of the things that help us see God's hand behind all of the events – are the predictions he makes about how it will unfold. The Old Testament contains prophecies written hundreds and sometimes thousands of years in advance that point to Christ. One of them – the very last one – is found in Malachi 4. There, in the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament, written 400 years before Christ is born, God tells his people what will happen next. I want to read that passage now. Malachi 4:1-6:

¹ Keith A. Mathison, *Good and Evil in The Lord of the Rings*, **TableTalk**, August 2011, p. 19f.

1. Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them.² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.³ Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty.⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.⁵ “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.⁶ 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.”

D. As I’ve noted before, prophecy is a genre we are not very good at, and it’s much easier to understand it after it’s been fulfilled than it is going forward. You may not have gotten a lot out of that, but here is what the Jews heard: before the Messiah arrives, Elijah will appear. In other words, the next thing to happen is the appearance of Elijah. He was their greatest prophet – the one who had had the greatest success in turning the people back to God, something he famously did by defeating the prophets of Baal in a duel on top of Mount Carmel.²

E. Elijah stands alongside Moses as one of the most significant people in Jewish life: where Moses represents the Law, Elijah represents the prophets; these are the two who appeared at the Mount of Transfiguration with Christ. If you have attended a Passover Seder then you know that part of that tradition includes setting a place for Elijah, and that the youngest child is to go to the door and look for him, because they are still waiting for Elijah to return. Before the Messiah can return, Elijah has to. That understanding comes from Malachi 4.

F. God speaks through the prophet Malachi in the 4th century BC – “I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes” – and then there is radio silence. For four hundred years God does not speak to his people. No books are written. No prophets speak. The people wait, and wait, and wait for Elijah. They wait, and wait. Some give up hope. Others soldier on. And then eventually the silence is broken when an angel appears to an old man and tells him that his wife will give birth to a son, John the Baptist, who will come in the spirit and power of Elijah.

G. That announcement is made in our text this morning. Turn with me to Luke 1 and we will start reading with verse 5.

² I Kings 18:20-40.

II. *In the time of Herod king of Judea*

A. Remember, Luke does his best to date the events he writes about. It's not "a long time ago in a far away land," but, "in the time of Herod, King of Judea." Herod was the provincial king appointed by Mark Anthony to rule over the Jews – to bring Galilee, Syria and Judea under a more unified, Roman provincial authority. He was a brilliant architect and legendary builder – if you go to Israel today you marvel at what he did. It's unbelievable! He was also a very vain, troubled and wicked man, and I think part of the reason Luke mentions him here is because he is going to contrast Herod the Great, King of the Jews, with the infant Jesus, and it will be clear that Herod the Great is neither great, nor the King of the Jews.

III. *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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.³ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*

A. There is a lot of information here. First, we are told that Zechariah⁴ is a priest. Please do not confuse *a priest* with *the high priest*. There were 18,000 priests in Israel at the time. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a small town in the hills – a village of maybe 100 people. So, he is the equivalent of the pastor of a small church in a small town. When you drive out in the country and you see a small church building – one that looks like it holds 75 people – that's Zechariah. Clearly he has a second job to make it work.

B. Second, we are also told that he and Elizabeth⁵ are *childless* and *old*. This is a throwback to Abraham and Sarah – who were also childless and old before Isaac was born. And this is also a problem. Not only was there a stigma attached to not having children - a stigma which was born almost entirely by the woman. (It was not uncommon for husbands to abandon their wives if she did not give him children, in particular sons.) There was economic hardship on the horizon. In that culture your children – especially your sons – were your retirement. They were your Social Security and 401K plan. You needed kids to care for you when you couldn't care for yourself.

³ This does not mean that they were sinless. The word that is used here, *amemptoi*, means blameless. In the Psalms the "righteous" were not without sin (Ps 32), and Paul, who affirms universal sinfulness (Rom. 3:23) says that he was blameless, *amemptoi* (Phil 3:6). Two things are being reported here: 1) they did not rest in their sin but repented and offered sacrifice for their sin; 2) their childlessness was not the result of any sin on their part.

⁴ Zechariah's name means "the Lord remembers," or perhaps, "the Lord remembers again." This is significant because most of the people had forgotten.

⁵ Her name means, "My God is an oath."

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C. Nevertheless, we are also told that despite these hardships, Zechariah and Elizabeth are faithful to God. He has not left her. They have not grown bitter.⁶ When a prayer request is not answered the way we want – and by the way, all prayer requests are answered. Some are answered yes, some are answered no and some are answered later. When our prayer requests are not answered the way we want, some people grow angry. They did not. Or, if they did, they continued to worship God anyway.

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

A. The 18,000 priests that served Israel were divided into twenty-four divisions of 750 men each. In light of this, each division served one week shifts at the Temple two times per year.⁷ And they rolled the dice to see who got to go in. The question is not, who gets to go into the holy of holies. That was what the High Priest did once per year - he would go behind veil, the one that was torn in half when Christ died because He has removed the barrier. A normal priest would go into the altar of incense twice a day – once in the morning and once at night – throw some incense on the fire, pray and walk out.

B. The smoke that would rise from the fire represented prayers rising up to God, which are “a sweet aroma to him.”⁸ We see this idea developed in both the Psalms and the Book of Revelation and this is why Christians from some traditions still burn incense.

C. While the priest was inside placing incense on the fire and praying, everyone else who had come that day would be praying for them outside, kneeling on the marble with their hands lifted up. And thinking, “Don’t take very long. This is really uncomfortable.”

⁶ It is worth noting that Zechariah and Elizabeth did not make an idol out of children (or family), which is something we (as evangelicals) often do. We are called to worship God and enjoy and steward things. Idolatry is when we worship things instead. We take many good things and make idols (God-things) out of them: food, glory, power, sex, money, etc. In the Christian subculture the family is one of the safe and respectable idols, and many believe that there is an unwritten promise that if we love God we will: 1) get married; 2) have kids; 3) our kids will be great – i.e., they will come to faith, get along with each other, etc. These are all good things, but it is easy for people at a family friendly church to make their family an idol and get mad at God if everything does not work out according to our plans. Family exists to worship Jesus. When we worship family we destroy them. Zechariah and Elizabeth are a good model here. Zechariah could have divorced her but he did not. They might have followed a plan similar to the one followed by Abraham and Sara (he slept with another woman in order to have a child) but they did not. They could have grown bitter at God but did not. They kept worshipping God. They loved and served him even though they did not have a baby. (And, incidentally, it appears – Luke 1:13 – that they kept asking for a child).

⁷ See I Chron. 23 & 24.

⁸ See Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4

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D. By the way, once you did this you were done for life. Your name was no longer in the lottery to see who went in. So, this is a big moment. And the fact that Zechariah has not been chosen before – remember, he's an old man – had to be a bit embarrassing. Forty to fifty years he's been in the lottery but never picked. Twice a day for two weeks ever year for decade after decade his number has not come up! And because the belief is that God is behind the selection – and because other things in Zechariah's life have not gone as desired – it has to feel even worse than getting picked last in gym class.

E. But finally, he has his chance. Finally, he is selected! And so he goes in, and he puts a bit of frankincense and myrrh on the coals. And the smoke goes up and he begins to pray. Almost certainly he would pray for the nation of Israel – “get us out of this mess; end the Roman occupation, send the Messiah!” – and he would pray for his wife and he would pray for a son.

F. They've been praying for a child for decades. Now he is as close to God as he will be. (You see this thinking with the Orthodox Jews at the West Wall in Jerusalem. The belief is, this is as close to God as we will ever get. People leave their prayers folded up in the crevices of the wall. I have not done that because Jesus is now the Temple and the Holy Spirit is everywhere. We can go directly into the presence of God where we are when we come in Christ's name. But that was not Zechariah's understanding at this point. He has longed for this chance.) He prays for a child - “Give us a child in our old age just like you did for Abraham and Sarah.”

G. And then he opens his eyes and ...

V. *Vs. 11: Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.*

A. As I've said before when we come across angels in the text, do not think Precious Moments figurines or Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

B. Angels are real. I know some of you are skeptical. As you will see it's really hard to make sense of the Gospels – especially Luke⁹ – if you write them off. And why would you? We marvel at the wrong things. The existence of angels is hardly as unbelievable as the incarnation itself. Do not be shocked that God can and would create other beings who are – at least for the time being – higher than we are. Be amazed that God would become as low as us and die in our place to rescue us!

⁹ Angels show up a lot in the Book of Luke – twenty-three times in all. They serve as messengers for God and protectors for us.

C. Angels are real and when they show up they frighten people.¹⁰ Part of this is that they come as a surprise. Part of this is either they are big and glorious, and perhaps part of this is that they are holy. And our reaction to perfect holiness is fear.¹¹ Perfect goodness highlights our sin. The whole experience is too much. We cannot stand in its presence. And so there is fear. Zechariah, like everyone else who comes into the presence of an angel in Scripture, is frightened. The Greek here means “intensely terrified.”

VI. *Vs. 11: Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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 call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 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 before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children (this is right out of Malachi 4!) and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

A. Elijah, your prayers have been answered! Your wife is going to have a son! This child will be great in the sight of the Lord.¹² This child is the fulfillment of Malachi 4. This child is going to bring you joy and help Israel out of her mess. Many – not just you and Elizabeth – but many will rejoice at his birth because he will supernaturally turn people back to God. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will walk in the steps of Elijah. Zechariah, your son is not just the one you and Elizabeth have been longing for, he is the one the nation has been waiting for. He is the last step before the Messiah!¹³

¹⁰ The verbs used here – *etarachthe* ... *phobos* – mean literally, “terrified with fear.”

¹¹ The manifestation of an angel is typically followed by the phrase “fear not.” This echoes the “fear not” assurances of God speaking to Abram, Moses, Hagar and Isaac. This should not surprise us, as John Chrysostom noted, “The most righteous of men cannot see an angel without feeling fear.” Angels are holy and those in their presence are aware of the weight of their sin and fear the judgment of God.

¹² The word “great” had been claimed by “Herod the Great.” Part of what Luke does here is set up a contrast between Jesus – the truly great king – and Herod, who claims that title. Here Zechariah is told that John the Baptist will be great as well. (Not as great as Jesus, but great all the same). By the way, we pay attention to the wrong things. Do not worry about the applause of others. It’s fleeting. We should always strive to please God instead of others.

¹³ There is even a bit more here. For instance, it appears as though they are to raise their son according to the Nazarite vow (Num. 6:1-12) – i.e., no alcohol and do not cut his hair. But it doesn’t say they are not to cut his hair, so perhaps this is something different. Note: the comment that John is never to drink alcohol does not mean that such drinking is wrong for all people – after all, Jesus turned water into wine. We are not to get drunk, not to get others drunk nor are we to break any laws (no underage drinking). But, drinking alcohol in moderation is not a sin for everyone.

B. Think about this, because what comes next is not good. Zechariah is inside the Temple - closer to God's manifest presence than he has ever been before. He has just placed incense on the altar, prayed for the nation and then prayed for a child. He opens his eyes and a glorious angel is right there. And this angel announces, "Your prayers will be answered." The right response would be: to fall on your knees offering praise to God; to scream, "Yes" or "At last!"; to high five the angel; to somehow show some excitement. Zechariah doesn't do any of those things. He says, "How can I be sure?" And this gets him in trouble.

VII. *Vs. 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." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel.¹⁴ I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 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 appointed time."*

A. Are you kidding me? You've been asking for this for decades. Today you finally win the lottery. You enter this room, closer to God than before. You pray. I show up, an angel, notice the wings! There are only two of us mentioned by name in the Bible. I am one of them! I stand in the presence of God. He sent me here to give you this information. And you say, "Prove it?" OK, I'll prove it. You're done talking. I've heard enough out of you for a while. You will not be able to talk from now until the time the baby is born.¹⁵

B. It's not wrong to ask questions. As we will see next week – Mary does! Of the same angel! And she does not get in trouble for it. But there is a difference between questions born from confusion and question that grow out of a hardness of heart. Zechariah is guilty of unbelief.¹⁶

VIII. *Vs. 21: Meanwhile, the people...Meanwhile, outside the people are kneeling on the hard marble, arms in the air, thinking, "OK old man.... enough already." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 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.*

¹⁴ Gabriel – whose name means "power of God" – is one of only two angels named in the Bible. He appears four times in the Bible, twice in the Old Testament (Dan 8:15-27; 9:20-21) and twice in the New. He also appears in quite a bit of intertestamental literature – e.g., 2 Enoch 24:1; 1 Enoch 40:9, the Babylonian Talmud, et al.. Elijah would have been familiar with all of these references.

¹⁵ This punishment is unique and surprising. God silences one of the only faithful voices at the time.

¹⁶ His doubt is perilously close to the attitude described in Luke 11:29.

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A. So, Zechariah comes out. He cannot talk. He is supposed to give a blessing. He cannot, so someone else probably stepped up to do so.

IX. Vs. 23: *When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

A. They go back to their small town. After a while Elizabeth conceives. And she spends the next five months in seclusion, probably thanking God ... that her husband can't speak. No, for five months she is overwhelmed with God's goodness and she says:

X. Vs. 24: *The Lord has done this for me.* Or, the ESV translation reads: *Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.*¹⁷

A. God "looked on me." When no one else was looking at me – when everyone else was ignoring me, writing me off as a tired old nobody. An old, poor woman from a small town – with no children and an insignificant husband. When no one else would give me the time of day God would. He answered my prayers! He took away my disgrace.

XI. The angel's appearance marked the end of God's four centuries of silence and the final preparation for the arrival of the Son of God. It was an exciting moment. And it shows God's hand in play. There are a few things for us to note here.

A. First – first and foremost – if you are looking for a takeaway from this passage, something to apply, let me suggest that you should be encouraged. The big message here is God keeps his word. God has a plan and it's brilliant. Take heart, he worked this out thousands – tens of thousands? hundreds of billions? – of years before we were born. The principles take-away should be that He is in control even when it may not seem like it. He will bring about all of the things He has promised to bring about. There is a plan.

B. If you are looking for something else let me say that there are two people in our text today – and maybe you are like one of them.

¹⁷ There is an allusion here to Rachel's words after she gives birth to Joseph. She reports that her ability to have a child takes away the shame (disgrace) of being barren. It's important not to make this text say more than it does. God does not always remove this particular struggle – i.e., some women who wish to become mothers do not. But there is a pattern here that we can and should lean into. God will take away our guilt and our shame and He will bring a new world where there is neither.

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C. Perhaps you are like Zechariah. He was a good man. He was doing the right things. And God does use him in key ways. But when the angel said, "It's game time! Here we go. You're on!" he was not ready. He didn't really believe. The prayer God was answering – for a son for them – was hardly without precedent. Abraham and Sara were very old when she conceived. We have additional accounts with Hannah, Rebecca and Rachel. He should have known God could answer this prayer and he should have been ready. Zechariah makes me wonder: Am I ready? Do I see the God-moments in front of me? Do we see the opportunities he has for me? Exactly how much of an invitation to be about God's work are you expecting? Are you a Zechariah? Has God prepared you – and invited you – to greater levels of service and significance. Are you a Zechariah? Are you holding out for more proof? There are lots of people sitting on the sidelines waiting for something more.

D. The other person to look at is Elizabeth. Perhaps, like her, you feel disgraced. Perhaps like her you feel like life has been unfair. You feel pushed down. People being people, they can be very unkind. I suspect there were some in their village who said ugly things about Elizabeth. They made much of the fact that she wasn't able to have children. Maybe they suggested that God didn't love her. You can almost hear it. "They are not as holy as they act! Something is wrong! God is not answering their prayers, giving them children." Gossip can be vicious. Well, God removed her disgrace. And he offers to remove ours.

1. Her son – John the Baptist – will announce the arrival of God's Son – Jesus Christ – who will arrive as our High Priest and sacrifice. He will die in our place. He comes as our Temple, as our mediator, as the one we gather around to worship. He takes away our sin – like Zechariah's sin of unbelief. And he takes away our shame, like the shame of those who have been sinned against.

2. Maybe you are an Elizabeth. I had a conversation with someone this week who said, "I'm not coming to church because I'm too ashamed. And I know that everyone will look at me." I said, "That's not true." "Yes it is. They will stare." I said, "For the record, they stare at me. No one will stare at you and if they do, who cares. We are all broken. God accepts us. He offers us his grace and he removed shame."

E. If we are Zechariah we need to ask for forgiveness. If you are like Elizabeth - you have been mistreated or abused. You have been put down – the good news is, God takes that on himself as well. He not only dies for our sins but he takes the shame as well. He will lift that from you as well. Give you sin and your shame to Jesus. Whether you are a Zechariah or an Elizabeth, the next step is to look to Christ.