

Cindy Bassett

# The Bible Corner



## Zechariah's story

Zechariah glanced up from his prayerbook and looked over at his wife as she slept. At just that moment, in the dim light that had cast shadows of uncertainty on everything in the room, Elizabeth seemed almost a child lying there.

He smiled softly to himself with the realization that if he had allowed it, Elizabeth would have patiently sat up with him all night. She would not have disturbed him with idle chatter. Instead, she would have stayed close to her husband in silent watch.

But Zechariah had insisted that she retire. Elizabeth needed her rest. They were both well advanced in years.

Although it was late, Zechariah sat in his chair, his prayerbook still open before him. He had to prepare himself for his annual week of service at the temple. Zechariah was a member of the Abijah division of the priesthood. Tomorrow, he would join with the others at the temple.

He always looked forward to this time of year. In all of Judea, the temple was the only place not subject to Herod's jurisdiction. It seemed as if Roman soldiers existed in every other place throughout the district. The temple represented a small portion of independence for the Hebrews.

Zechariah was no longer bothered by such things. As a Hebrew, he answered to a higher authority in his life. Some day, this God would send a new king, the Messiah, to save the Hebrews from all of their ills. They had been waiting for the Messiah for hundreds of years. God had promised Him long ago, and Zechariah was certain it surely would come to pass. But lately, he no longer believed that he would see the Messiah in his lifetime.

Zechariah was an old man who no longer felt invincible, as most men do when they are young. Some of his youthful dreams had to be relinquished. He had reached an age at which these failed hopes could only be accepted with peace. But sometimes late at night — although he never told Elizabeth — the thought of never having had a child still made him ache with a deep sense of loss.

Elizabeth, for her part, had told Zechariah many years ago to see about a divorce. Under Hebrew law, this would have been permissible. But her attempts to persuade her husband had been futile. Zechariah loved Elizabeth more than his own life. Yes, some things had to be accepted with peace from the God who had richly blessed them both in so many ways.

It was with these thoughts that Zechariah slowly drifted off to sleep in the chair. Suddenly, he sat straight up again. He was quite certain, even in this half-dream state, that he had heard someone speak. A voice had clearly said, "Listen! I hear the voice of someone shouting, 'Make a road for the Lord through the wilderness; make Him a straight, smooth road through the desert.'"

Whatever could it mean? Zechariah looked down and saw his prayerbook lying face down on the floor. "Ah, the sound of the book falling is what startled me," he reasoned. He glanced at the point at which the book had opened. There on the page were written the exact words he had just heard.

Zechariah fell asleep and forgot all about the strange incident, until the moment when he stood in the temple with the other priests. They had just drawn lots to determine which one of them would enter the inner sanctuary to burn the incense. Some priests would never be chosen during

their lifetime for this honor. As it happened, the lot fell this time to Zechariah.

As Zechariah entered the sanctuary for the offering, a large crowd of people gathered in the temple court and began praying. Zechariah kept his eyes lowered in respect as he busied himself preparing everything at the altar. When he ignited the incense, Zechariah prayed, "Happy is the man who has the God of Jacob as his helper, whose hope is in the Lord his God, the God who made both earth and heaven, the seas and everything in them. He is the God who keeps every promise."

The sweet aroma of the incense filled the entire sanctuary, and when Zechariah looked up, he thought he saw a figure standing just to the right of the altar. He dismissed the idea, saying, "The rising smoke has cast strange shadows."

But in the next instant, Zechariah heard the figure speak. The figure was a tall man whose face shone with a great brightness. Zechariah was too afraid to move.

The man looked kindly at him and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah. God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name the boy John. He will go before the Messiah telling others, 'Make a road for the Lord through the wilderness; make him a straight, smooth road through the desert.' He will prepare many Hebrews for the coming of the Messiah."

Zechariah rubbed his eyes in disbelief. "But this is so hard to accept. I'm an old man who has given up on most of his dreams. How can this ever be?"

The man replied, "I am the angel Gabriel. God sent me to tell you this good news. Because you have not believed, you will be stricken silent until this child is born. For God's promises will soon be realized." With that the angel disappeared just as suddenly as he had come.

Meanwhile, the crowds outside grew disturbed. It was not customary for the incense ceremony to take this long. When at last Zechariah emerged, he could only make gestures to the people, and so they understood that he had seen a vision. In a

few days' time, Zechariah returned home.

A short time later, just as the angel had foretold, Elizabeth became pregnant. "How wonderful and kind our God is," she cried, "to take away my disgrace of having no children!" When Elizabeth's time of waiting was over, a son was born. Zechariah, too, was filled with great joy, but still, he could not speak or hear.

As was their custom, when the child was eight days old, all of the relatives gathered with Elizabeth and Zechariah for the circumcision ceremony. "Is the baby to be called Zechariah after his father?" they all asked.

"No!" Elizabeth said firmly, "the baby will be called John."

"But there is no one in your family named John. Perhaps you should ask Zechariah," they insisted.

So they wrote their question on a piece of paper and handed it to Zechariah. Zechariah wrote John, and immediately his speech returned. Everyone started praising God.

Word of the miracle spread throughout all of Judea. The people spoke of nothing else. Everyone kept saying, "Who is this child destined to be? For the hand of God is surely in this."

Elizabeth and Zechariah thanked God for the great event in their lives. Soon their son, John the Baptist, would be the herald of an even greater event which was still yet to come.

### For Advent reflection:

Zechariah had prayed nearly all of his life for a son. When God granted his wish, he thought it was too good to be true. Do I sometimes act as though Jesus is too good to be true?

### For further reading:

- 1) The story of the birth of John the Baptist is found in Luke, Chapter 1.
- 2) The prophets had foretold the coming of the Messiah for many years. Isaiah predicts the coming of John the Baptist in Isaiah, Chapter 40:1-11.
- 3) When Zechariah ignites the incense, he prays Psalm 146:5-6.

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