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Sunday School Lesson

TOPIC:

“An Angel Foretells of John's Birth”

Luke 1:8-20

VERSE DISCOVERY: Luke 1:8-20 (KJV, Public Domain)

Prepare

- A reenactment or retelling in greater detail of the casting lots process and/or the incense burning rituals would be a great opener and lead-in for this lesson. Another idea would be to find an online video showing and explaining these processes that students might be able to visual comprehend some of the scene taking place in this lesson.
- Find an object lesson on God's promises. God will do what He said He would do each and every time. His word we can lean on and trust even when we don't understand how He's going to do it.

Explore – Full Lesson Available on pages 5-11

God's promises never fail! If He promised it, it will come to pass! “Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass,” (Joshua 21:45). But sometimes, as we find out in our lesson, even when we hear and know the promises of God, it's hard to embrace them for yourself.

In a previous published article titled, *Embracing the Promises of God*, I wrote:

“Are you just saying, “AMEN!” to the preacher and the message or are you really getting into an agreement with the words coming forth from the mouthpiece of God? Do you think the songs that are sung, which carry His good word and lifts your soul, do you think they are just to make you feel good for a moment, or are they truths binding themselves on your heart because you can see with eyes of faith what God really wants to do in your life? Do you think the words written in that Holy Bible are just a collection of tales to temporarily inspire you or are they moments in the lives of others God is using to show you that He can do the same thing for you?”

It's one thing to hear messages, read the Word, and listen to the songs about the promises of God, and it's another thing to grab hold of them for yourself and believe



with a fervent grip that they are for you, too. Embracing God's promises is saying, "I may not have it now, but my faith is tied to what God already spoke over my life. With my physical eyes, it may not currently be before me, but with my spiritual eyes, I am persuaded that God will do what He said He would do, and I embrace that truth! I choose to hold on to what God said over all else!"

*Embracing is active participation in claiming the promises of God for your life. God gave mankind a will and He won't force you to believe His promises, but oh how sweet it is if you do. He puts it out there, and many times He gives evidence that it will happen (and sometimes He doesn't), but it is up to each individual heart to not only accept it but to hold on to what He spoke for dear life. That's why Hebrews declares, "Let **us** hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)" (Hebrews 10:23; emphasis mine). The word "us" in that verse lets us know that it is our personal responsibility to lay hold of everything concerning our faith God speaks, including His promises. If you believe that God is faithful, then believe that He will faithfully follow through with all that He spoke concerning you!*

*God will do His part without fail. Our job, when the unwelcomed interruptions of life come, is to keep on embracing that truth when facing whatever is before us. Today, get a hold of the promises of God for your life and refuse to let them go."
(©WordForLifeSays.com/Embracing the Promises of God).*

When Zacharias heard the wonderful promises of God spoken over his life, his initial reaction was to doubt the words. Don't doubt God's promises! If He spoke it, He will do it!

Activities

- Promises, promises. We all hear them, and we all make them. What is it that sets God's promises apart from our own? Think on that and on the **Adult Journal Page**, list the ideas you came up with. When times of questioning try to come and overtake those blessed promises, these truths that you jotted down will stand as a great reminder of who God is and why His promises are to be trusted. For the **Kid's Journal Page**, they can write about why we can always trust the promises of God.
- In the **Draw the Scene** section, younger students can draw a picture of the angel talking to Zacharias.
- Alternate activity sheets such as **Word Search, Crossword, and more** can be found on site for those who just want to work with printed materials.
- Crafts covering the birth of John the Baptist can readily be found by doing an online search.



Review

- Commit to memory the base verse from the lesson: ***“But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John,” (Luke 1:13).***
- Fill out the review sheet provided (page 12)

Life

Earlier I shared with you from my devotional on embracing God's promises. Are there areas in your own life where this is a struggle? What is getting in the way of fully grabbing hold of everything God's has promised you? Identify those stumbling blocks. Once you can put a "face" to something it's easier to deal with it when it comes. Every time you recognize one of those obstacles trying to poke its head in your life, counteract its attempts with God's promises from His Word. Let God's words be louder than those voices of doubt.



TOPIC:

"An Angel Foretells of John's Birth"

Luke 1:8-20

VERSE DISCOVERY: Luke 1:8-20 (KJV, Public Domain)

Before Gabriel spoke to Mary, he appeared to another person in relation to the future Messiah. He came to a man by the name of Zacharias and foretold of the child he would father. This child would grow to be a messenger before the Lord and would be he of whom it was prophesied as the one who would be characterized as, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," (Mark 1:3).

Imagine for a moment, the president, king, or any head of a country, coming to an area to visit. Before their arrival, another would have been sent ahead to announce and make the proper preparations before they get there. Such as it was in ancient times when kings came into town. And, so is the ministry of John the Baptist, the child whom Gabriel speaks of in today's lesson as a promise to Zacharias, when the King of all kings makes His arrival on this earth.

ZACHARIAS' DUTY

Luke 1:8-10 "And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense."

Righteous before God. Walking in the commandments. Blameless. These are some of the noteworthy characteristics of Zacharias and Elisabeth his wife (see Luke 1:5-6).

Although he was a faithful priest in the eyes of the Lord and his wife modeled the same holy qualities, they had no child. Being well-advanced in years, their time for this possibility seemed to be over until God steps in and shakes up their way of thinking and reorders their life with a great and precious promise.

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The number of priests available to serve in those days was large. Some estimates put them in the tens of thousands. With that, 1 Chronicles 24:1-9 lays out the divisions of the priests. There were 24 in all and from these divisions, the duties that were to be performed in the temple were selected by **“lot.”** Using the term **“lot”** it describes the system of selection that depended on God to choose who will do what and when they will do it by the drawing or casting of lots.

On this particular day, Zacharias had the privilege to experience the opportunity to serve before the Lord. **“According to the custom of the priest's office”** (see 2 Chronicles 8:14), as the lots were cast for the duty of burning incense (see 1 Chronicles 23:13; 2 Chronicles 29:11), Zacharias's name was chosen to perform this job **“in the temple of the Lord.”**

This was a highly desired position and considered a great honor. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice was offered, the chosen priest would burn incense before the altar symbolizing the prayers of the people who were positioned outside of the temple (**“praying without”**), during this time.

AN ANGEL ENCOUNTER

Luke 1:11-14 “And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.”

Above all else, we believe God to be sovereign. We believe Him to be in charge of time and circumstance. And, although Zacharias is considered old at this time, we believe God held his name in remembrance to appear on the scene and receive the promise of he who would be chosen and work to prepare the way of Christ at this chosen time in history.

While reverently going about his duties which, as already noted, had to be performed twice a day (see Exodus 30:7-8), **“there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord.”** Imagine, if you will, being in that holy atmosphere where one might not hear anything but the burning of coals and the shuffling of his own feet; an atmosphere where everything is sacred and yet, God chose you to come before Him in the temple to perform this holy calling.

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With the aromas of spices filling the air, off to the right side of the altar, beyond the ascending fragrant cloud, Zacharias sees **“an angel of the Lord.”** Some depictions of this encounter may have Zacharias just hearing the angel, but the Bible says he **“saw him.”**

And when he **“saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.”** Throughout the Bible, any time an angel appeared directly to an individual it was often unsettling and troubling to the individual (see 1 Chronicles 21:30; Matthew 28:2-4). God does not do anything frivolously, especially regarding having a heavenly host appear to mankind. This was an occasion to take seriously. Not knowing at that time, the exact reason for the visit, **“fear fell upon him.”**

“But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias.” Zacharias’s reaction wasn’t necessary, and the angel sought to ease the millions of horrific thoughts that may be running through his mind. God’s dispatched angel came with a message of promise, not of peril; therefore, he spoke, **“Fear not;”** the same comforting words he will give to Mary in Luke 1:30.

“For thy prayer is heard.” Zacharias was a righteous man and he was a praying man and according to God’s holy word, “The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry, “(Psalm 34:15; see also 1 Peter 3:12). Knowing the heartbreak and shame of being childless; I don’t know how many years Zacharias prayed, but in His perfect, pre-ordained time, God let him know He **“heard.”**

In a previous article titled *Know That God Hears*, I wrote: *“Our deepest heart’s desires do not fall on deaf ears. God is not playing cat and mouse with us. He wants us to seek Him that He may be found: “Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near,” (Isaiah 55:6). Then, He can respond!” (Word For Life Says)*

And, respond He did. The angel told Zacharias of what would be. He said, **“Thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.”** A woman, who like her husband is “well-stricken in years,” (Luke 1:7) will finally, not only have a child and know the joy of motherhood, but she will **“bear thee a son.”**

Just think, after all those years of let downs. After feelings of disgrace have surely washed over them and it seemed all hope is gone – God favored them. They would know what it is like; they will experience their very own fulfilled promise in the form of a son named **“John.”**

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His birth would not only bring **“joy and gladness”** to the parents whose hearts longed to hear a babe crying in their home, and to hold and cuddle their own flesh and blood – but, **“many shall rejoice at his birth.”**

As time goes by and Elisabeth does give birth, we see in Luke 1:58, “her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; *and they rejoiced with her,*” (emphasis mine). I believe the angel’s words were meant to have a much farther reach of impact in the lives of the people who will respond to his call of repentance, and eventually be led to Christ.

JOHN’S FORETOLD CHARACTER

Luke 1:15 **“For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.”**

“For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord.” When Jesus came on the scene, during His years of ministry, He testified of John and said, “For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist,” (Luke 7:28; see also Matthew 11:11). Jesus’ ministry obviously is superior in depth and importance than that of John the Baptist’s (read John 1:29-34 for John’s own testimony of the Lamb of God’s ministry; He [Jesus] that is preferred before him [John the Baptist]).

Nevertheless, because of his position and unique ministry as the one who would prepare the way before the Savior, John the Baptist stands out and is extraordinary among the name of the prophets. From the time of the womb, he would bear witness of the Christ (see Luke 1:41; John 1:15, 29-34).

“And he shall drink neither wine nor strong drink.” This is reminiscent of the instructions we see given to Samson’s parents when an angel appeared to them. The withholding of oneself from **“strong drink”** as well as other strict requirements, was in keeping with what is known as a Nazarite vow (compare Judges 13:4-5). This devoted life would be a sign of the holy and set apart nature of the individual; that God was doing something special in his life.

“And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.” John the Baptist would be heavenly empowered and enabled from the womb to fulfill the role as that

NOTES:



prophesied voice and that holy messenger, heralding to all who would listen, before the arrival of the Savior (compare Isaiah 40:3). Anything done for God must be Spirit-powered. Many today try to operate in their own power but fall short of producing godly fruit for the Kingdom. John's life and mission would be infused with **"Holy Ghost"** power!

JOHN'S FORETOLD MINISTRY

Luke 1:16-17 "And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

"Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God." When John the Baptist came into his ministry, he is seen "preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Matthew 3:1-2). People from all over the area came: "Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins," (Matthew 3:5-6). He was working to turn hearts back **"to the Lord their God."** He was winning souls to the Kingdom, fulfilling this prophecy over his life.

John's style of clothing (camel's hair garments) and eating choices (locusts and wild honey) did not detract from the impact he made on those who came out to see and hear him. The love for people, the Kingdom, and the ingrained ministry in him compelled him to reach out and help those who were seeking **"the Lord their God."**

"And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias." In the Old Testament, it was prophesied, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me..." (Malachi 3:1). When we study the New Testament, particularly the sayings of Jesus on the subject, we see that John was, in fact, he that came **"in the spirit and power of Elias [Elijah],"** (read Matthew 17:11-13 for further clarification).

"To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children." In correlation with this prophecy of John the Baptist being compared to Elijah, here too we see another O.T. promise being fulfilled through his life and ministry. With almost exact wording, Malachi 4:5-6 talks about Elijah coming again with a focus on restoring familial relationships. The very fabric that makes up the strength

NOTES:



of the home is relationships; those connections would have **“hearts”** renewed in love and peace for one another again.

Some see it in a different way, perhaps referring to the turning of the hearts of the children of Israel back to the way of their fathers, the patriarchs.

Regardless of how one views it, his ministry softens **“hearts”** that will be ready to receive the healing that Christ will offer.

When John the Baptist does arrive on the scene to do the work of the Lord, the people would have been 400 years without hearing the voice of a true prophet of God. The above quotation from Malachi 4:5-6 were among the last words spoken by a prophet in the Old Testament.

“And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” The ministry of John the Baptist would change hearts and minds from unjust behavior to **“just”** behaviors; leading people to look for the greater gift of salvation which is found in Jesus Christ. As such, he was making **“ready a people prepared.”** John the Baptist can be seen as the opening act, while Jesus Christ, without a doubt, is the main event.

ZACHARIAS' DOUBT

Luke 1:18-20 “And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.”

“Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.” Surprised at the announcement. Overwhelmed at the possibility. Over-thinking the proposed miracle. All this and more led Zacharias down a path of doubt.

Here, Zacharias's prayer was heard, and God sent a messenger to declare he's getting what he prayed for. But the faith that caused him to ask in prayer was missing at the declaration of the miracle. Rather than respond with rejoicing, he responded with questioning.

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What happened?

He looked with human eyes at human conditions and made up his mind for God, that it just wasn't possible. Let us be reminded of this great biblical truth: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God *must believe* that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him," (Hebrews 11:6; emphasis mine).

Zacharias was a "diligent" seeker of the Lord (as noted earlier in this lesson). God was ready to reward him, but he just couldn't see with his natural eyes the miracle ahead. Therefore, he asks, "**Whereby shall I know this?**"

What God speaks always comes to pass, so the angel, who is revealed as the same "**Gabriel**" who speaks with Mary – his response below is just.

"I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings." Coming as a holy messenger of God, what "**Gabriel**" brought was good news! As if it isn't awesome enough to see an angel, period – this one brought a promise with him. Most would think this is convincing enough, but for Zacharias, he met the miracle with misgivings about his situation and wanted something more: "**Whereby shall I know this?**"

Thus, the angel Gabriel said, "**Thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed.**" If we fast forward to the birth of John, particularly the eighth day when it was time for him to be circumcised according to custom, which would also be the same time when he officially gets his name, we see Zacharias wrote the babe's name "John" on a tablet. And when he did so, "his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God," (Luke 1:59-64). Until that day he was "**not able to speak**" according to Gabriel's words because he "**believest not.**"

Remember, what God promises, He is able to perform (Romans 4:21). Believe Him for it all.

NOTES:

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Please Answer the Review Questions Below

1. **T or F.** Zacharias' job was to burn incense in the temple of the Lord (Luke 1:9).
2. What were the multitude of people doing outside? (Luke 1:10)
A. Worshipping B. Helping C. Sleeping D. Praying
3. What are things some that will set this baby of promise apart from all others? (Luke 1:15-17)

4. What was the angel's name in this lesson and why was it significant? (Luke 1:19)

5. What was Zacharias' wife's name? (Luke 1:13)
A. Rebecca B. Mary C. Elisabeth D. Martha

6. **T or F.** Because of his doubt, Zacharias was not able to see until John was born. (Luke 1:20)
7. Why did Zacharias question the angel about the promise (Luke 1:18)? What does it teach us about the promises of God when dealing with our own circumstances?

