

God with Us through Sacrifice Forever

Introduction

The Text

Luke 1:5–13

⁵ In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸ ¶ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,
⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

2 Weeks, 6 Verses, 5 Questions

A. As we move forward in our analysis of this story, we shall focus this morning (and next Sunday as well) on [vv. 8-13](#). Of these 6 verses I want to ask 5 questions—5 questions that are critical for us to ask and answer if we are to truly understand what God is up to in this His inauguration of the age of fulfillment in the Messiah His Son. I want to know: “God, what are you up to here? Why are You doing things the way that You’re doing them? What are You trying to communicate to us in all of this?!”

1. Here are my 5 questions, the first 4 of which we will attempt to answer this time; the last question will occupy a sermon of its own next week:
 - a. Why This Couple? (Zechariah and Elizabeth) ([vv. 8-9a](#))
 - b. Why This Place? (The Temple in Jerusalem) ([v. 9b](#))
 - c. Why This Hour? (The Hour of Incense) ([v. 10](#))
 - d. Why This Angel? (Gabriel) ([vv. 11-12](#))
 - e. Why This Way? (Through Prayer) ([v. 13](#))

One Dominating Presupposition

A. Now, before I go any further, I should point out that behind every one of these questions is one dominating presupposition: namely, that our God is totally sovereign over all history and the outworking of His plan.

1. If this presupposition were not true, then my questions are nonsensical. If God is not in control of history and the outworking of His plan, but is a mere opportunist—shifting and adjusting His will to the sovereign will of man—then asking why He did things this way and not another is nonsensical. He didn't plan this, He's just going with it, making the best of it.
 2. But when we assume the sovereignty of the God of the plan, these questions brim with significance. He could have advanced His plan with any couple, in any place, at any hour, with any angelic messenger, in any way...so why do it like this?! Presupposing a sovereign God, we expect the details of this story to be significant—not random or coincidental...but planned with a purpose. He is communicating something here, but what?!
- B. Now, to be sure, as I've mentioned before, I am not just inventing this presupposition, Luke hands it to us. It is all over his gospel and Acts, and it is even strongly implied here in the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John, with the emphasis on specific "day"s and "time"s, as if God is planning things down to the minute, second, millisecond.
1. "And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time" (v. 20).
 2. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son (v. 57).
 3. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel (v. 80).
 4. All of these statements give us a sense that we are witnessing the redemptive drama taking place in a cosmic theater according to the precise plan of the divine Playwright.
- C. So as we come to this text with these questions, we can expect meaningful, even profound and illuminating, answers.

(1) Why This Couple? (v. 8-9a) [God]

- A. Our first question—"Why This Couple?"—reaches back into our analysis of vv. 5-7 last time. But vv. 8-9a give us something new, and even connect to the introductory notes I just made: "⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,^{9a} according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot..." (vv. 8-9a).
1. To give us quick context here, we must note that the priesthood in the first century was divided into 24 divisions (1Ch 24), each of which would serve at the temple in Jerusalem during the 3 major festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles) and for 2 other weeks out of the year. This would have been one of those weeks for Zechariah and his division—"the division of Abijah" (v. 5).
 2. So, of the 24 divisions, his was on duty. And within each division were literally 100s (probably around 750) of priests. And these priests were again subdivided and

given certain tasks in the service of the temple. Out of these hundreds of priests, Zechariah is chosen for the highest honor of all. What he would be asked to do (and we'll see exactly what this is in a moment) is something a priest was only allowed to do once in his life. This would be, without a doubt then, the high point of Zechariah's career.

- B. And he was chosen for this high honor...**"by lot."** Lots were sacred objects of unknown shape and material (perhaps resembling dice) that would give a yes or no answer to questions or select one person over another.
1. You might be thinking: "The cast of dice? Is there anything that implies random, coincidence, blind fate more than the cast of dice? It's like winning the lottery. It's just luck. And now you're trying to tell me that God chose this man and this couple by the cast of dice?" Yes, even the casting of dice, in His hands! **"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Pro 16:33).** With the casting of these lots then, it's as if God said, in effect: "Zechariah, I have decided to choose you."
- C. So, have no doubt, God chose this man, and He brings him near, and He makes him and his wife Elizabeth a promise: "Believe it or not, you will have a son. And this your will prepare the way for My Son, the Messiah."
1. But why? Why This Couple? This was last week's message but it bears repeating quickly here once more. Why choose a couple **"barren...and advanced in years" (v. 7)** to bear a child? Because such a couple would underscore both man's fundamental inability to work his own redemption and his utter dependence on God to work it for him. God tells a barren and elderly couple that they will have a child so that everyone would know: Only God could have done such a thing—**"For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37)!**
- D. So, again, Why This Couple? In a word: God! He is foregrounded as the **"founder and finisher of our faith" (Heb 12:2a).** No other couple could've more perfectly made the point: **"Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jon 2:9b).**

(2) Why This Place? (v. 9b) [God with Us]

- A. We continue to follow the story. Zechariah is chosen by lot, by God's decision, to do what? **"...To enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense" (v. 9b).** The priest at this point would move through the outer courts of the temple and into the Holy Place to offer incense upon the altar of incense. This would be the closest Zechariah could ever come to the holy presence of YHWH which was thought to abide in some way behind a final separating curtain in the Most Holy Place. Hence the high honor of this day for Zechariah.
- B. But this leads to my now 2nd question: "Why This Place?" Why the temple in Jerusalem? Perhaps we should begin by asking, fundamentally, what was the temple for Israel? Why was it so significant?

1. There is much we could say here, but at bottom, the temple represented God's dwelling in the midst of His people. There's a reason the temple was called the "house of the Lord" (2Ch 23:5, et al.). While Israel knew that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" (Acts 7:48); that the "heaven and highest heaven cannot contain [Him]" (1Ki 8:27); even still, the temple represented God's unique presence with them, His dwelling place.
 - a. This, after all, was the goal of the Exodus from the start: "...I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them... (Ex 29:46). He brings Israel out from under the yoke of slavery in Egypt, and into His family as His "firstborn Son" (Exo 4:22), and He lives in their midst—first in the tabernacle established in the wilderness, and then in the more permanent form of the temple upon their arrival in the land of promise.

- C. It would be important for us to see God's templing presence in its broader canonical context. We tend to think of the temple as occupying only the middle of the Biblical story, with Israel, and while this is perhaps technically true, it is misleading. What God was doing with Israel, He was doing both with a view to His original work with Adam and His coming work in Christ.
 1. You see it was God's design from the start to dwell with man. We are told even in Gen 3 that in some way God's presence was with Adam and Eve in the garden, that He walked with them there (v. 8). Heaven was always to merge with earth, God's dwelling with man's dwelling, but Adam aborted the mission.
 2. God's intervention with Israel and the establishment of His temple-presence was reminiscent of this original condition. That is why we read of all the garden and cherubim imagery incorporated into the design of both the tabernacle and temple.
 3. But this temple was anticipatory, temporary in its form. God has always been moving towards the original goal of the whole earth as it were being His temple and all humanity dwelling with Him, in His family, as His people. This is why the new heavens and new earth are described the way that they are in Rev 21:1-4:
 - ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.
 - ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
 - ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place (tabernacle) of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.
 - ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."
 - a. Interestingly in this overwhelmingly positive picture, there is a long line of negatives: no sea, no tears, no death, no mourning, no crying, no pain...and,

down in v. 22 we read it: no temple: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22).

- i. Indeed, back up in v. 16, the new Jerusalem is measured and its “length and width and height are equal.” It’s a perfect cube, symbolically connecting us to the other perfect cube in the Bible: the Most Holy Place. Implication: All the earth will be the Most Holy Place of God’s presence with us! His presence will reach saturation point!

(1) Can we just stop at this point at reflect on the astounding reality that God’s driving goal from the very beginning is to be near us? Some of us have been trying to do life alone. You get that stiff upper lip, trying to be tough, I can handle this, I can make it. You weren’t meant to be doing this on your own. You were created to be with Him. We all know there’s something wrong with a little kid growing up without parents. That’s why some of you here have even made incredible moves to adopt. “Get into my family! You shouldn’t, you mustn’t be alone!” They need to be cared for. But have you ever thought, am I that orphan? Am I that kid, trying to do life without my heavenly Father? You can’t live like that, or, at least, you can’t live like you were created to.

4. In between, Israel’s temple in Jerusalem, and this temple-earth of the new Jerusalem, is the coming of the Christ—God in the flesh, Immanuel, God with us. He is the true temple-presence of YHWH come down. His coming moves the redemptive plan of God one massive step closer to His goal! Now, instead of man getting all ready and carefully coming towards the outer edges of the Most Holy Place, in Jesus the Most Holy Place starts coming towards us!

- D. So, Why This Place? Why choose the temple as the place to first announce the coming Messiah’s birth? Isn’t it only right, that the place which always stood for God’s dwelling-presence with Israel would be the place He announces His plan now to come in the flesh and dwell with her in a more climactic way?!
 1. So, again, Why This Place? Building off of our last word: God...with us. God alone could work our redemption. And the end goal of our redemption is to be brought back into His presence.

(3) Why This Hour? (v. 10) [God with Us through Sacrifice]

- A. But there are more details to mine for meaning in this narrative. For, as we keep reading, in v. 10 we are told that all of this is happening not only with a specific couple in a specific place but at a specific hour: “And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense” (v. 10).

1. The hour of incense? What is that? We will speak of this incense next time as it truly symbolized the prayers of God's people rising up to Him, but this morning it is important for us to note that this hour of incense coincided with the hour of the burnt offering legislated back in [Exo 29:38-39](#): “³⁸ Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. ³⁹ One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight” ([Ex 29:38–39](#)).
 - a. “Day by day regularly” (or “continually”)...sacrifice. And it's here at the time of sacrifice—believed to be the evening sacrifice because it coincided with the hour prayer and would account for the “multitude” of people that were praying outside the sanctuary—that Zechariah was chosen by God to enter the Holy Place.

- B. With this idea of a continual or perpetual sacrifice, we start to see another layer added to the temple symbolism. Does it stand for the presence of YHWH dwelling with His people? Absolutely! But the temple also pictures for us the way He is able to continue to dwell in our midst, sinners though we be: namely, sacrifice! If a holy God is to dwell in the midst of a sinful people it is only by means of sacrifice. It would be good to put together the two texts I've read from [Exo 29](#). I read first from v. 46: “...I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them...” But how would He do this? [Vv. 38-39](#)—sacrifice.
 1. Sacrifice enters the picture the moment sin enters the picture. As God told Adam: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” ([Gen 2:17](#)). Or in Pauline language: “The wages of sin is death” ([Rom 6:23](#)). But Adam and Eve don't die right away, do they? Spiritually, yes, but not totally. Something else dies in that garden. In a move of amazing grace God takes their naked shame and covers it with the skin of an animal, a sacrifice. And sacrifice becomes a critical emblem situated in the nexus of the divine-human relation from that point on. Indeed, this emblem eventually becomes, we could say, the burning center of the entire temple complex, quite literally.
 - a. If you've ever tried to sit down and read through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation (I commend your desire), chances are, if you even made it past [Gen 10](#), you got bogged down somewhere around the end of Exodus or Leviticus. The details concerning the tabernacle (temple) get a bit overwhelming. And do you remember what much of it is concerned with? Sacrifice.
 - i. On this day you kill this many animals, on that day you kill that many animals, for this offering you kill them this way, for that offering you kill them that way.
 - ii. You take the blood and you put it here, you put it there, you sprinkle it on the garments of the priest, you put it on their ear and thumb and toe, you put it on the horns of the altar, you pour it out at the base of the altar, you throw it against the sides of the

altar, you sprinkle it before the curtain, you sprinkle it on the mercy seat, and on we could go.

- b. It's as if everything and everyone in the temple was to be bloodstained! Death and blood fill the temple! Have you thought about this lately?! What a stomach-turning ordeal! We think: "God this sounds like a horror movie or a haunted house, not the house of the living God! I would never let my kids watch this go down!" He says, "You are right to see such things as a horror, for your sin, its origin, its effects, its ends are a horror to me. Do you get it?!"
- C. The temple, then, holds in awesome balance 2 truths about God: (1) God is holy; and (2) God is gracious. He is holy. He cannot look upon sin with favor. Sinners must be punished, exiled from His presence. But He is gracious. He will yet pursue us and dwell in our midst. He will cover our sin with the death and blood of a substitutionary sacrifice.
- 1. And as we consider such things about God, 2 correlating truths come into view concerning man: (1) I am sinful; and (2) I am forgiven.
 - a. The centrality of sacrifice is meant to keep before us the deplorable nature of our sin. It takes a steeled conscience to lay your hands on a lamb in solidarity with it, slit its neck, feel its life come out of it, with its blood all over your hands, and think: "My sin's no big deal, I'm a pretty good person." No! "I'm all messed up. Look at what my sin has done! Look at what God says my sin deserves!"
 - i. Are we trifling with sin? Is it just a game to us? "How close can I get to the line?" God says you better take sin dead seriously.
 - b. But as the life comes out of that animal, there is another side to it: I am forgiven. God has placed my sin on the back of a substitute. This sacrifice died that I might live...with Him.
 - i. Are we overwhelmed with our sin? Do you see no way out, no way God could ever receive you? Receive the sacrifice, watch it die and know: There is no double jeopardy in the courtroom of heaven. The sacrifice died for you sin, He will not exact that penalty from you!
 - 2. This is how the orphan finds a home! Our analogy from earlier breaks down at this point. We aren't the helpless orphan left by our wicked parents. We, in our own wickedness, have left a loving Father! We orphan ourselves. This is why children tell their parents: "No!" They aim to be kings but would make themselves orphans. So it is with us. If we are to truly be brought back to the Father, something, someone needs to pay for our sin: sacrifice!
- D. And it's here in the temple at the time, most likely, of the evening sacrifice, while the hungry flames of the altar were still consuming the unblemished lamb upon it, that God announces to Zechariah that to him will be born a son. And this son will prepare the way for God's Son,

of whom John would later testify: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Joh 1:29b). “He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Heb 9:26b). His blood is the “blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mat 26:28). His sacrifice, His blood, secured in earnest all that the temple sacrifices symbolized. In what other place, at what other hour would be better for God to reveal this?!

1. So, Why This Hour? Continuing to build our sentence: God with us...through sacrifice. God alone could work our redemption. The end goal of our redemption is to be brought back into His presence. And we can only be brought back through the sacrifice of Himself!

(4) Why This Angel? (vv. 11-12) [God with Us through Sacrifice Forever]

- A. Our final question pertains to what happens next, particularly in v. 11: “And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.”
 1. In v. 19 this angel identifies himself: “I am Gabriel!” You say: “And...?” Let me ask you: When was the last time Gabriel appeared in redemptive history?
 - a. Dan 9. Daniel’s in exile in Babylon, he’s reading the scroll of Jeremiah, he perceives that Israel’s exile away from Jerusalem was to last 70 years (Jer 25:11), he prays, he fasts, he confesses the sins of His nation, and He begs God to remember His covenant, His promise, and to restore Israel from exile back to Jerusalem.
 - i. And God sends Gabriel to him with a word: I’ll do more than restore Jerusalem, I’ll do away with all that caused the exile in the first place, I will “finish the transgression...put an end to sin...atone for iniquity...bring in everlasting righteousness...seal both vision and prophet...and anoint a most holy place” (v. 24). But I will do it after a long period of time has passed (not 70 years but 70 7s of years), and I will do it in the most unexpected way: “An anointed one [Messiah] shall be cut off and shall have nothing” (v. 26)! A reference to the person and work of Jesus!
- B. So, Why This Angel? Like Daniel, Zechariah would have been interceding in the Holy Place for his nation. As Daniel, probably, was praying towards Jerusalem where the temple once stood (6:10), so now Zechariah is in the rebuilt temple. As Daniel was praying “at the time of the evening sacrifice” (9:21), so Zechariah was probably praying at the exact same time. And as Gabriel was the angel sent by God to Daniel to foretell the coming Messiah, so now, hundreds of years later, Gabriel is sent to Zechariah to announce: “The Messiah, He is all but here, days away!”
 1. So, again, Why This Angel? Continuing to build our sentence: God with us through sacrifice...forever! It’s an impossible redemption, God wants to dwell among us

sinners, He will do it by coming His Son and offering Himself up to death, whereby He will put an end to sin and bring in everlasting righteousness, that we might be with Him forever!

- a. O what a day in the life of Zechariah. Every detail matters!