

Wednesday in the Word
Digging Deeper
December 22, 2021
Law to Grace

Luke 1:5-19 KJVS

[5] There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. [6] And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. [7] And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. [8] And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, [9] According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. [10] And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. [11] And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. [12] And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. [13] 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. [14] And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. [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. [16] And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. [17] 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. [18] And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. [19] 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.

A roughly 400 year period of silence separates the life of living under the Law of the Old Covenant to the new paradigm of living under the Grace of the New Covenant that dawns on us through the words of Luke's gospel. Grace has always been the operative motive of our Creator. His overwhelming love for us can bear no less, else we would all have been destroyed. As His Agape devotion to us became flesh and dwelt among us, (John 1:14) He was able to display this Amazing Grace to us in a new and wonderful way. The Way. (John 14:6) We often like to picture Jesus in His humanity. Was He a serious man? Angry? Sad? Distracted? Too heavenly minded? It would be best to understand Him as gracious. Though He frustrated the self righteous, He left the guilty in awe of His forgiveness, grace and love. (John 8:10-11) A model for us. Have you left the guilty in your life struck with your forgiving grace? Please learn to do so. We so want to condemn others or point out their failures; in our minds it is for their benefit but honestly we make ourselves feel comparatively righteous. His grace must be reflected in us. Jesus and His New Testament gospel opens a much needed time of change to the world, the need for which has been trained into mankind through the Law of God. The constant requirement to keep the law was a laborious burden to those under it which always pointed to personal and corporate sin and the desperate position forced upon them. Things were about to change. Zechariah was chosen by God to receive the privilege of commencing the construction

of the bridge between the Old and the New. The Law and Grace. The position he held as Priest, though he was righteous before God, (verse 6), might have caused for him a complacency that made the prospect of a miraculous birth seem doubtful. (Verse 18). This solitary couple would participate in bringing about the fleshing out of the Spirit of Elijah, in their son, John, who would precede and announce the coming of the Messiah, the promised King of Israel. (Verses 13-17).

Let's dig just a bit into the system that facilitated this pivotal point in history. Notice the burden of God's Law and its constant presence in daily life.

[5] There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

Herod the Great, was a Roman client king of Judea, He is known for his colossal building projects throughout Judea, including his renovation of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the expansion of the Temple Mount towards its north, the enclosure around the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, the construction of the port at Caesarea Maritima, the fortress at Masada, and Herodium. Vital details of his life are recorded in the works of the 1st century CE Roman–Jewish historian Josephus. Many scholars believe Jesus was born in the Fall of the year. They base this on the following reasoning, quoted from the scriptures. The “course of Abia” refers to the one of the 24 divisions responsible for worship in the Temple. The Greek word so translated implies a system of rotation, each “set” or “course” of the priests serving from Sabbath to Sabbath. That named after Abia, or Abijah, appears in 1Chronicles 24:10 as the eighth of the twenty-four courses into which the houses of Eleazar and Ithamar were divided by David. On the first return from the Captivity only four of these courses are mentioned as having come back to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:36-39), and the name Abijah is not one of them. It appears, however, in later lists (Nehemiah 10:7; Nehemiah 12:4; Nehemiah 12:17), and the four-and-twenty sets were probably soon re-organised. Zechariah was of the priesthood division of “Abia” or “Abijah”. The priests were free to marry outside the limits of their own caste under certain limitations as to the character of their wives (Leviticus 21:7), and the fact of a priestly descent on both sides was therefore worth noticing. Her name was Elisabeth; The name in its Hebrew form of Elisheba had belonged to the wife of Aaron, who was of the tribe of Judah (Exodus 6:23), and was naturally an honoured name among the daughters of the priestly line. It appears in an altered form (Jehovah being substituted for El) in Jehosheba, the wife of the priest Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:2).

8] And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, [9] According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

The order of the courses was, as has been said, one of rotation. The distribution of functions during the week was determined by lot. That of offering incense, symbolising, as it did, the priestly work of presenting the prayers of the people, and joining his own with them (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8), was of all priestly acts the most distinctive (2Chronicles 26:18).

[10] And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

Knowing as we do from this Gospel, what hopes were cherished by devout hearts at this time, we may well believe that the prayers of the people, no less than those of the priest, turned towards the manifestation of the kingdom of God. In that crowd or multitude, we may well believe, were the aged Simeon (Luke 2:25), and Anna the prophetess (Luke 2:36), and many others who waited for redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:38). What followed was, on this view, an answer to their prayers.

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

The altar of incense.—The altar stood just in front of the veil that divided the outer sanctuary from the Holy of Holies. It was made of shittim wood, and overlaid with gold, both symbols of incorruption (Exodus 30:1-7; Exodus 40:5; Exodus 40:26). Its position connected it so closely with the innermost sanctuary that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 9:4) seems to reckon it as belonging to that, and not unto the outer court. It symbolised accordingly the closest approach to God which was then possible for any but the high priest, when, in his typical character, he entered the Holy of Holies on the day of Atonement.

13] 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.

The English monosyllable, John represents the Greek Joannes, the Hebrew Jochanan. The name appears as belonging to the men of various tribes (1Chronicles 3:15; Ezra 8:12; Jeremiah 41:11). As the meaning of the Hebrew word is “Jehovah is gracious,” the announcement of the name was in itself a pledge of the outpouring of the grace of God.

[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.

The child now promised was to grow up as a Nazarite (Numbers 6:4), and to keep that vow all his life, as the representative of the ascetic, the “separated,” form (this is the meaning of the term) of a consecrated life. He was to be what Samson had been (Judges 13:4), and probably Samuel also (1Samuel 1:11), and the house of Jonadab the son of Rechab (Jeremiah 35:6). The close connection between the Nazarite and the prophetic life is seen in Amos 2:11-12. The absence of the lower form of stimulation implied the capacity for the higher enthusiasm which was the gift of God. Denying the flesh enabled and enhanced the spirit. This is represented in our fasting. The same contrast is seen in St. Paul's words, “Be not drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

19] 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.

No names of angels appear in the Old Testament till after the Babylonian Exile. Then we have Gabriel (= "the strong one—or the hero—of God"), in Daniel 8:16; Michael (= "who is like unto God?"), in Daniel 10:21; Daniel 12:1; Gabriel, here was to prepare the way for the Messiah's coming. Concerning his standing in the presence of God, the imagery was drawn from the customs of an Eastern Court, in which those stood who were the most honoured ministers of the king, while others fell prostrate in silent homage. Compare the "angel of His presence" in Isaiah 63:9, with our Lord's language as to the angels that "behold the face" of His Father, Matthew 18:10.)

We see above the compound measure of the Law of God, the strict requirements included and the historical and religious accuracy of the Word of God. All this serves to show us God's perfect truth and reliable nature as well as the unyielding precision of the arrangement of His will and plan. No person could even attempt to keep and follow these requirements, much less expect God to honor their attempt. As Zachariah and Elizabeth interacted with the Lord's Messenger they stood upon the very center pin of of the swinging of the hinge of History. Their son, John would go on to proclaim the coming of the Messiah who would not only keep the perfect Law of God but fulfill it in all its intricacy. Jesus, Yeshua Hamashiach, (God Saves in This Anointed One) in bringing Mighty God down to earth in the body of the perfect man would usher in the Age of Grace. The Law, not abolished but fulfilled, would no longer be held over us to punish us but would now find its full meaning in pointing us to the One Who would take our place to suffer, die and truly earn eternal life and thereby present it as a gift to those who would receive it. May God in Christ be eternally praised. And may you as well occupy till He comes ever ready to offer this gift as His ambassador. Amen.