

Chapter 3

Thou shalt call his name John

Luke 1 vv 1-25

Look, through the streets of Jerusalem there walks a priest. He is walking in the direction of the temple, for he is on his way to the house of God. His face has a happy and cheerful expression.

Who is this priest? ... Listen!

Daily in the temple, sacrifices were made. So not only on feast days but every day the smoke of the altar ascended on high. At nine o'clock in the morning was the morning sacrifice made. In the land of Canaan that time was known as the third hour. In the afternoon at three o'clock the priest burnt the evening sacrifice. That was known there as the ninth hour.

The sacrificial beast was killed and laid upon the altar. Then the priest went with the blood of that beast into the Holy Place. At the same time he had incense with him. In the Holy Place stood the golden altar of incense, just in front of the veil. Behind the veil was surely, the Holy of Holies? On the golden incense altar he burned the incense. With his finger he smeared some of the blood on the four golden horns of that altar.

That blood pointed to the Lord Jesus, Who was to come. Just as in the sacrifice the blood of the lamb flowed, so one day the blood of the Saviour would be shed for the remission of the sins of God's people.

When the priest had burned the incense

and smeared the blood on the horns, he turned back to the court, where the people awaited him. Then he spread his hands over the people and asked a blessing. Our ministers do that too when the service is over, you have heard that many times haven't you?

It goes without saying that only one priest could do this work, but there were so many priests, thousands of them! So it was not the same priest every time who performed that sacred office, no, each time there came a different priest. They cast lots for this. That was the fairest way, don't you agree? The priest who then had a turn, could not again cast lots. Once in his life then a priest could officiate, not more.

Yet, since there were so many priests, it frequently happened that they never had a turn at all. But of course each one wanted to carry out this task once.

Now this time the lot had fallen on the priest whom we saw walking so calmly towards the temple. That is why he has such a happy look on his face. He was beginning to get old. He had been hoping and waiting his whole life long that he too might perform this work once. Yet since he had grown so old, he had probably given up hope. Then suddenly, quite unexpectedly the lot fell upon him. He had glowed with joy, his eyes had sparkled.

Now, he is making for the temple to offer sacrifice. See, there he is climbing the steps

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up to the house of God.

But who is he? His name is ZACHARIAS. Evidently he lived in Hebron which lies a few hours walk to the south of Jerusalem. Hebron was a city of priests, yes, it was one of six free cities. There also lived his wife, Elizabeth. Both Zacharias and Elizabeth were God-fearing people. They were two converted people in whom was the fear of God.

But there was one thing about which they were rather sad. They had no children and amongst the Jews that was a disgrace. Zacharias had prayed much about it, but it seemed that his prayers were never heard. Now they had grown too old, now it was no longer possible. They would die childless.

So Zacharias was now doubly happy, that he could make the morning and evening offering. At least that privilege was permitted him.

Look, the smoke of the offering is already ascending. Then Zacharias takes the bowl with blood in one hand, the incense in the other and steps into the Holy Place.

In the Holy Place there reigns a peaceful calm. Reverently Zacharias walks to the golden incense altar. Once there, he puts the bowl with blood down on the floor. The incense he lights with the fire which he also has with him. Thick clouds of incense rise up. He bends, takes the blood, dips his finger in it and strikes it on the four horns.

Oh, many priests did this out of habit, nothing more. For most of them it was a matter of form, without any thought for its

signification.

But Zacharias carries out this work with holy awe, and with a prayerful heart. Through faith he saw the great Redeemer, Who was to come, and for Whom he longed. Through faith he knew that his sins would be forgiven through that Surety and Saviour.

Suddenly, he starts. Close by him, to the right of the altar an angel of the Lord descends, a heavenly messenger. When Zacharias sees him, he is greatly moved. He trembles! But, listen!

From the mouth of the angel comes the friendly sound: "fear not, Zacharias; for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John... He... shall drink neither wine, nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost."

Thus speaks the angel. Yea, he tells still more. He says that that baby will be the fore-runner of the Lord Jesus.

When he stops speaking, the deepest silence reigns for a moment. Zacharias listens to it all in the greatest amazement. But then there comes a look of disbelief on the priest's face. He doubts whether it is true that the angel has told him, whether it is a deception.

"Whereby shall I know this?" he asks mistrustfully, "for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." It is as though he says: "Are you not deceiving me? How shall I know that you are speaking the truth?"

A little reproachfully the angel answers - "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God!" It is as though he says: "But Zacharias, who do you think I am? I stand before God. Do you think I would come to you with lies and deceit? The Lord has sent me to bring you this good news and

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is this your answer? Do you mean that the Lord is a liar and a deceiver? Shame on you!"

Children, Gabriel is saddened by the unbelief of Zacharias.

"Behold", continues the angel, "thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak until the day that these things be performed." That was to be his punishment for his unbelief and mistrust.

Then the angel flies to heaven and Zacharias is left alone. What was going on in the heart of Zacharias, the doubting priest?



Zacharias and Elizabeth

We don't know. Was he sorry for his unbelief? ---

But he has not yet completed his task, for there, outside, in the court the people are standing and waiting for his blessing. They are already getting impatient, it's taking so long this time. But look, there he is!

Yet Zacharias cannot pronounce the blessing, for he is dumb. He waves his hands and indicates to the people that they must just go away.

Then these people understand that something out of the ordinary has happened. They realise that he has seen a vision. Full of wonder, they go away, busily talking to each other about what has occurred.

Later Zacharias goes home. But neither can he tell anything to his wife. So she gives him a little board which was covered with soft wax, a

writing tablet, and on this he writes what has happened in the temple, and why he cannot now speak. Now his wife Elizabeth can read it. From now on Zacharias must write everything, if he wants to ask a question.

We can well believe that he was grieved about it. Now he must walk about silent, like a dumb man. This was the bitter consequence of his doubting and unbelief.

Luke 1 vv 26-56

In the North of the land of Canaan, far away from Jerusalem, lies the little town of NAZARETH. There lives Joseph, an ordinary carpenter. Daily he goes out with his tools to do all sorts of jobs. He is betrothed to Mary, a homely girl, who also lives in Nazareth. These two are not among the rich, no they are poor. They are among the very poorest of the land.

Yet Joseph and Mary are descendants of David, the mighty king of Israel. Oh, there is not much left of that old, wealthy royal house. All the wealth and glory has disappeared. Joseph is actually a prince and Mary is in fact a princess, but it certainly does not look like it at all. Joseph has to work ever so hard to earn a meagre piece of bread, and Mary, who is to become his wife is also poor.

But both of them served the Lord in truth, both had received a new heart from the Lord, and that is worth more than all the gold in the world. Or don't you believe that? What would you rather have, riches and honour, or a heart that is renewed by God and that fears Him?

One day Mary is busy in the house. Suddenly there stands beside her an angel of the Lord. Mary looks up amazed and asks herself

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what this can mean.

"Hail!" the Angel says to her. Do you know who that angel is? It is Gabriel, the same angel who had also appeared to Zacharias in the temple. That was now six months ago.

Then Gabriel tells her that she shall have a Son and that that Child will be the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, the long promised Redeemer and Saviour. At the same time the angel informs her that Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias, will also have a son. Oh, and why does Mary have to know that? What has she got to do with that unknown lady? ... Elizabeth was no unknown lady to Mary, for she was her cousin. The two were therefore related to each other.

Is Mary also disbelieving, like Zacharias? Does she also ask for a sign? No, happily not. "Be it onto me according to thy word!" That means, "It is good."

When the angel has departed, Mary sets out on a journey. She is going to pay a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. What a lot these two women had to talk about. Elizabeth would become the mother of John, the fore-runner of the Lord Jesus, and Mary would become the Mother of the Lord Jesus Himself. They understood each other, both are overjoyed. Both have believed.

They sing of the wonderful ways of the Lord. They have through faith accepted that the Lord Jesus would suffer and die for their sins also, that the Lord Jesus would be their Saviour too. Both of them, Mary and Elisabeth were sinful people. All are sinners, but the sins of Mary and of Elizabeth would be washed away through the blood of the Son of God.

For three months Mary stays with Elizabeth and then she goes back to her home at

Nazareth.

Luke 1 vv 57-80

Not long afterwards there is great joy in the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. That which the Lord, through the angel Gabriel, had promised, had now been fulfilled. Their shame has been taken away, for they have now got a baby, a son. The Lord has made them happy.

The neighbours and friends hear it too, and they come to congratulate Elizabeth, the happy mother. Zacharias sits nearby, happy and sad. What's that? How is that possible? He is happy, because they have a little son, but he is sad, because he is still dumb and cannot utter a word.

Eight days later the little boy will be circumcised. With us the children are baptised, aren't they? Then the Minister also announces the name. Among the Jews there was at that time no baptism, but they knew only circumcision. All little boys, who were eight days old, had to be circumcised. That had surely been commanded by God to Abraham long ago? But with circumcision they also received a name.

The neighbours and friends want to call the little fellow "Zacharias". After all, that is the name of his father, and it was then quite normal in the land of the Jews for the eldest son to be named either after his father or after his grandfather. That happens frequently nowadays, especially in Holland.

But Elizabeth shakes her head and quickly answers, "Not so; but he shall be called John".

In complete amazement the neighbours stare at her. Incredulously they answer, "There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name."

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They let her know that they think he should be called Zacharias, not John.

But Elizabeth maintains quite firmly that there is no mistake.

Then they call Zacharias and look at him questioningly, because after all, the father and not the mother must make the final decision. This was the usual custom among the Jewish people.

But Zacharias can give no answer because he is dumb. So he beckons for that little writing tablet, which he has now been using daily for months. With a steady hand he writes on it: "His name is John".

The women read it inquisitively. Then they shrug their shoulders. They cannot understand the reason at all. But there, after all Zacharias and Elizabeth must know what they are doing, because it is their child.

At that same moment the Lord opens the mouth of Zacharias, so he can now speak. And what does he say? — Listen!

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed his people".

Oh, the heart of the old priest is filled with heavenly joy. Yes, in the Bible it says that he was filled with the Holy Ghost and prophesied.

He goes on to speak of the Redeemer, the Saviour who will now shortly appear. That Deliverer would redeem all His chosen ones and save them from their enemies. What enemies? — Well, by that he means sin and the devil. And now his child, the little John will be the fore-runner. Later, when he grows up, John will "give knowledge of salvation by the remission of their sins", which will be obtained through the Lord Jesus and given to His people. The face of Zacharias beams with joy. Through faith he sees already the coming Saviour.

At Christmas this hymn of praise is still sung among our people.

The neighbours and friends go away. They are rather surprised about many things. So many strange and wonderful things have been happening lately. So it is no wonder that almost everywhere in that district these things are discussed. One tells it to another, and all who hear it undertake to keep an eye on that child. They want to see what will happen to the little lad.

Then we also read in the Bible: "And the child grew". That means he got bigger and learned to walk and to talk. Oh, what happy years those must have been for Zacharias and Elizabeth. Don't you think so too?