

Announcing Baby John

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[0 : 0 0] all friends travel back with me to about 4 BC we're Jews, we're gathered at the temple for the evening sacrifice and prayers we're witnessing the priest who offers the incense attempting to give the Aaronic blessing but he's mute we're gathered at the temple, this is a temple reconstructed by King Herod Herod the Great Herod started construction about 16 years ago and most of the construction work except for final details and adornments were completed about 6 years ago Herod the Big Noter Big Ambitions Herod doubled the size of the temple foundations from those that existed in Solomon's day so probably maybe 2.30 in the afternoon we make our way into the temple precinct we cross a large plaza and then we'd ascend a broad stairway and then through the double gate and the first court we'd enter would be the court of the Gentiles and as we look ahead from the court of the Gentiles we'd actually see the temple building rising above us but between us and the temple would be another staircase a barricade and the walls of the inner court and the first inner court that we'd enter would be the court of the women and then proceeding on

Jewish men only and those who were ritually clean could enter the court of the Israelites and the court of the Israelites is where the sacrificial altar stood and then of course ahead was the temple building the temple building in which only priests could enter so here we are maybe there's some Gentiles with us they'll be in the court of the Gentiles and then Jewish women then Jewish men and priests and we're looking up at this priest we're looking up at this priest who's just exited the temple building and he's mouthing the words of the Aaronic blessing from number 6 but nothing is coming forth from his vocal cords I mean if you think about it this has really been a a pretty strange afternoon hasn't it I mean it was about 3 o'clock the time when the evening sacrifice is offered when we waited and waited and waited for this priest this priest the particular one who offers the incense inside the holy place that first long room in the temple the one who in that holy place offers prayers for the nation we waited and waited we waited for him to come out

I mean where was he what's happened has God judged him is God judging us well as you recall after what seemed like an eternity he finally emerged I mean it was odd wasn't it standing there before us trying to speak but silent mute something remarkable has clearly happened to him inside the sanctuary something supernatural has obviously occurred well it's just as well we know so well the words of number six the Lord bless you and keep you the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace well what do you think should we sort of respond as we normally do blessed be the

Lord God the God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting Zechariah I mean he's just standing there mute it's extraordinary when you think about it Zechariah I mean Zechariah is a great priest why would God have done this is this reasonable well I want us to look at the passage if you turn with me to Luke 1 and first of all just focus on those first four verses the opening verses of Luke's gospel because it gives us a hint just a hint as to the reason for this strange occurrence Luke writes since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word I too decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first to write an orderly account for you most excellent

Theophilus so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed just notice there Dr.

[5 : 33] Luke's approach he's saying I haven't included anything in this gospel that couldn't be checked out and see especially verse 4 he says it's actually possible to know the truth it's possible to know the truth about these things so Luke sets out to give this orderly account of the life of Jesus and as he does so Luke puts great emphasis chapter after chapter on discipleship on hanging on in your faith certainty certainty about Jesus now the gospel Luke's gospel is addressed to someone simply called Theophilus just simply meaning God lover but he's likely someone of social standing possibly a major official perhaps someone needing encouragement in their walk with the Lord the gospel is written to give reassurance in a world where the pressure on the Christian faith is great that's a world just like the one we live in certainty so let me ask you this morning are you certain about the trustworthiness of the

Bible are you certain about the trustworthiness of God of the God who has revealed himself in scripture so we head towards the Christmas season are you certain about the true meaning of Christmas you see friends if we actually can't be certain about Jesus life then Christmas just simply becomes a sentimental time but whether Jesus came at Christmas whether he rose from the dead having been executed on a Roman cross are in fact extraordinarily important because it seems like on a daily basis doesn't it in the media there is attack after attack on certainty indeed certainty of any kind and I guess that's what sort of the summary of really having a post-modern mindset is attack on certainty and there's certainly attack particularly on the truth of the uniqueness of Jesus

Christ Philip Adams writing in the Weekend Australian some time back wrote an article which was simply entitled Having Faith in Disbelief Philip writes this Though awed by its majesty and mystery I apprehend what is in the final analysis simply a meaningless cosmos welcome to a world without an author a purpose a destiny the only meaning that it has is a subjective meaning that you choose to ascribe to it you're at liberty to formulate your own philosophies your own moral values and your own ethics and Philip went on in that article and simply concluded this way I do not believe in the divinity of Jesus let alone in his resurrection how different

Philip Adam writes to Dr. Luke you see Luke wants to build up this case for certainty build up a case for certainty into us he's a thorough he's an accurate historian but friends our certainty is grounded much more in just someone who's got good investigative methods and techniques because look again at verse 1 notice particularly the end of that first verse Luke writes events that have been fulfilled among us see Luke's telling his readers and that means he's telling us he's telling us you can believe what's written it's all in fact been predicted Luke's saying my gospel is thorough it's been put together sure in an orderly manner but this gospel can be checked out in the Old Testament and Zechariah

Zechariah was someone who as a priest really knew the Old Testament scriptures Zechariah standing there he is on top of the stairs the stairs leading up to the temple and Zechariah is mute it's clearly an act of God question is is that harsh what do you think is it unfair what's happened to him it's judgment on some sin in his life but what sin is it I mean if you think about it Zechariah was clearly a righteous man I mean that's actually what the text tells us see Luke tells us that Zechariah belonged to a priestly order of Abijah Abijah was one of 24 priestly orders if you're good with numbers each of these 24 orders had about 700 priests and so the nation of Israel at this time about 4

[11 : 14] BC had 18,000 thereabouts 18,000 descendants of Aaron if you're a descendant of Aaron a male descendant you're a priest and as I reflected on this week 18,000 priests that makes for one mother of a church staff meeting doesn't it we don't have that many down at Deep Creek how do all of these priests I mean there's 18,000 of them how do they get a go in the temple well each of these orders each of these 24 was rostered on twice a year for a one week period and within that week then lots were cast in fact four lots were cast to select priests for special worship tasks well Zechariah's order is on duty this week and not only was Zechariah a priest but his wife Elizabeth we're told was also a descendant of Aaron this is a good family and Luke tells us that Zechariah was a deeply religious man in fact in verse 6 we read that this couple my paraphrase would simply be they practiced what they preached with respect to personal morality with respect to ceremonial observances they were blameless blameless couple and this was a couple who also knew something very tangible about the trials of life they were childless this was a couple who were childless in a society that typically judged barrenness as God's judgment as God's judgment on you because of sin but of course we the readers we know that's not the case they were righteous before God childless and I suspect disappointed disappointed that their evening meals were not regularly interrupted by changing dirty nappies disappointed but certainly not bitter and in this matter

Zechariah and Elizabeth are a great example for us you see they did not allow the difficulties of life real genuine deep difficulties of life to become catalysts for spiritually deadly bitterness well here's Zech well Zech I mean that's the name that his mates called him in the order of Abijah and the greatest day of Zech's life has arrived I mean not only is his order been rostered on for duty in the temple but the third lot has been cast and he's been chosen chosen for the hugely symbolic the just wonderful privileged role of offering the incense incense was offered twice a day nine o'clock in the morning three o'clock in the afternoon it was the time of sacrifice and prayer now you can realize

I'm sure with those thousands of priests that many of them never in their lifetime got an opportunity to take part in these tasks well the first lot's been cast a priest would have been selected to cleanse the altar to prepare its fires then a second lot would have been cast a priest would have been selected to actually offer the burnt sacrifice and also to go in and cleanse the altar of incense and the third lot has been cast hallelujah hallelujah my numbers have come up it's not a line for crown casino zek is going to be able to offer the incense so i want you to try and imagine i want you to try and just feel the emotional intensity of this moment i mean the pinnacle of his life just just try to imagine how his heart must have raced in the morning you know chomping on his bit of veggie toast flossing his teeth giving lizzie a little joyful peck on the cheek as he left for the temple the day that he longed for has finally come and zek goes and he selects two of his best mates likely his best mates from the order to act as his assistants and i've just simply taken the liberty to call his mates jebaniah and zikri they are jewish names you can find them in one of those long genealogies jebaniah and zikri so i want you to capture this scene in your mind the scene is zek jebaniah and zikri they walk towards the holy place the long room the first room in the temple building behind the veil of the holy place the cuboid the holy of holies and as they walk towards there shebaniah would have filled a golden censer with incense zikri would have got a golden bowl and put burning coals in it from the sacrificial altar they would have entered the holy place the coals would have been placed on the altar of incense and then shebaniah and zikri would have left zek would have entered carrying the incense the incense to be burnt as a symbol of prayer prayer you see could only be offered corporately after the animal sacrifice on the altar outside had been made and that is just a wonderfully symbolic picture for us isn't it because we can only come into

God's presence we can only communicate with God through Jesus Christ Jesus Christ saviour of the world the one who died on a cross as the perfect once for all sacrifice death on the cross so that I so that you through faith in him may know the certainty the certainty of sins forgiven the certainty of unrestricted access to God the father well here's Zeke he's standing before this altar of incense praying I wonder what his prayer was praying for the nation praying for deliverance praying indeed that the Messiah the long promised Messiah would come that God's promised king and rescuer would come and then suddenly look with me in the text of verse 11 there appeared to him an angel of the

Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense when Zechariah saw him he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him but the angel said to him don't be afraid Zechariah for your prayer has been heard your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son this is a supernatural message from God your prayer has been answered God is at work but what prayer well certainly the prayer of Elizabeth and Zechariah that they would have a child I mean how exciting Peter and Julie Taint are with us here this morning and it was with great excitement early in this year 2006 that the announcement was made that Julie was pregnant after many years and numerous disappointments and sadnesses and let me say Julie's RE class down at Box Hill North Primary well they're just simply over the moon every time

[19 : 30] Julie brings little Sienna into the class which she did last Thursday morning friends this was already Zech's best day of his life I mean now he must have simply been blown away a baby boy and this promised child this promised child in fact answers two prayers at the same time answers the prayer for a child in their house their own child and the prayer for God to work redemption in the nation Gabriel the angel said your wife Elizabeth will be your son and you'll name him John you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great in the sight of the Lord he must never drink wine or strong drink even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit he will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God friends this is a cause for great joy

John's ministry John's ministry a ministry akin to that of the Old Testament prophets his ministry in fact will be a signal that the Lord's decisive work of salvation is being progressed and if you like think of it this way John the Baptist acts as a bridge between the old and the new you see in the old the Holy Spirit came and left people freely however we read that John will be filled with the Spirit even before his birth and that's just a lovely foreshadowing of the church era when the Spirit is given to all of us who believe so here's John the promise of John the prophet John the prophet who will call the nation to reform to repentance to turn to God and live differently friends Dr.

Luke when he writes this he wants us he wants us to be absolutely clear about the events behind Jesus birth and so what does he do he actually starts where the Old Testament ends so that we can see we as the readers of Luke's gospel can see how the Bible is fulfilled and if you can just keep your finger in that page and just flick back a few to page 778 I want to just have a very quick look at the book of Malachi page 778 the book of Malachi this prophecy written 400 years before the angels announcement and on page 778 in Malachi 3 verse 1 we read see I'm sending my messenger to prepare the way before me then in chapter 4 verse 5 lo I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes he'll turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents so that

I will not come and strike the land with a curse John the Baptist will be the fulfillment of a 400 year old prophecy and so if you turn back to Luke the angel declares to Zech in verse 17 with the spirit and the power of Elijah he will go before the Lord their God to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord you see friends God's story of salvation it just goes straight on from the Old Testament this is no coincidence this is no chance we're dealing here with certainty God's hand is on top of all of it promise fulfillment God's word is just simply trustworthy

God is trustworthy well here's this wonderful promise of a little boy for Zeck a little boy who's going to be running running ahead of the promised Messiah and Zeck's baby is going to be the fulfillment of a 400 year old prophecy but this baby he's going to be quite some man because we read he's going to be in the spirit and the power of Elijah think back to Elijah Elijah was the one who fearlessly confronted his nation that had turned their back on the living God and we know from later on in Luke's gospel that indeed John the Baptist called Herod to account he called him to account for his immorality and John lost his head for it fearless

[24 : 44] John the Baptist the forerunner of the world's greatest rescue mission what's the world's greatest rescue mission simply when God in Christ came to save us from our own destruction so as we head towards Christmas when we think of Christmas don't separate Christmas from Easter they're intimately linked here's Zeck what a moment in his life he's a pious man he's a man who clearly knew the Old Testament scriptures knew them intimately a man who's just had the extraordinary privilege of God Almighty sending Gabriel sending his messenger to spell out that not only that their much prayed for baby will in fact be the fulfillment of that prophecy back in

Malachi not only that but also that the Messiah is on the way so how's Zeck going to respond well my sort of paraphrase of this would be possibly a yell of excitement right on right on Zechariah said to the angel how I know that this is so I'm an old man my wife's getting on in years don't you think that's amazing I mean Zech refuses to believe that God could intervene in the natural aging process of his wife's body and I don't want you to miss the irony of this scene I mean he's a religious man he's in the midst of a religious act that is being carried out in accordance with God's word but disbelief disbelief in fact

Zech's response denied the very meaning of the ritual that he was carrying out Zech upright upright Zech but Zech was unable to handle God working out his purposes in the world you see Zech knew intimately that throughout all of Israel's history God had been working out his purposes indeed Abraham and Sarah had modelled having a baby in old age hadn't they this hugely important event given the promises that God had made to Abraham this failure of Zech this sin of disbelief at God's word is simply captured by the angel Gabriel at the beginning of verse 20 look with me you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their time

Abraham went on as God's messenger and promised a severe but a relatively brief discipline on Zech for his disbelief so here he is now standing before us standing before the temple crowds and he's mute he's unable to speak and it is exactly as God promised and friends for us disregarding God disregarding his word is not some sort of little sort of trifling matter because whatever God promises he will perform think about it he promised a forerunner didn't he to the Messiah and John was born and John pointed to

Jesus God promised a saviour and God in Christ Jesus of Nazareth was born the God man and I guess it would have been at about 30 years of age thereabouts John the Baptist declared this of the promised Messiah Jesus here is the lamb of God as he saw him coming here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world this is he of whom I said after me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me I myself did not know him but I came baptizing with water for this reason that he might be revealed to Israel and John testified I saw the spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him I myself did not know him but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me he on whom you see the spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the

[30 : 08] Holy Spirit and John says and I myself have seen and have testified that this is the son of God so what's our response then as we head towards Christmas do we trust God do we trust his word see when I ask that question I'm not sort of saying do you recognize the existence of God I'm not asking well do you know some facts do you know some stuff some information about the Christmas story what I'm actually asking is do you personally trust Jesus Christ put it another way are you depending solely on Jesus death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sins what God promises

God will perform God does it in his own time and he clearly does it in surprising ways when the time of fulfillment comes we realize don't we that God's timing was much better than our own plan because we often so often want God to adopt our own plans but the beginning of this gospel the beginning of Luke's gospel tells us that God's plan has its own design indeed it has its own timing and Zek's belief nor anyone's his unbelief nor anyone's unbelief none of that will thwart God's plans because his plans and purposes can't be frustrated it the opening verses of Luke's gospel remind us also simply of the need to always trust our heavenly father see the way that our heavenly father answers our prayers certainly in our experience sometimes will stagger us will surprise us but it will always be for our good and it will always be in accordance with his perfect will think of this story

Zechariah and Elizabeth what did they want they wanted a baby what did they get they got a prophet a prophet like Elijah Zek's faith needed to be strengthened and God disciplined him to achieve that I guess at a very sort of earthy level what God gave Elizabeth was just a very restful pregnancy I mean this was just no nagging husband for months on end Zech's faith was strengthened we know that because just a little bit later on in the chapter when John is actually presented for circumcision Zechariah has given back his voice and you know the first thing that he does the very first thing that Zechariah does when he gets his voice back he praises God and that's my prayer for each of us here this morning that we would indeed be praising

God praising God that in his amazing love he came among us he came among us to die for us so that we might enjoy him forever so friends trust the Lord trust the Lord in all the circumstances of life you know those little things that crop up every day trust the Lord in the big things that crop up in our lives because disbelief it's not some little small trifling matter because when we fail to consistently trust God when we fail to consistently trust his word what are we doing in reality what we're doing is we're impugning his name and his character the message is pretty simple really when the king of kings speaks our response is simply one of trust and obedience let us pray