

Elizabeth was barren—God had witholden from them that which they rightly esteemed the greatest earthly blessing. To have no children was also considered a reproach and a mark of the divine displeasure (Ps. 127:3, 5; 1 Sam. 1:7, 8; Gen. 30:1). **And they both were now well-stricken in years** This is a quaint old English expression for "were growing old," had passed the meridian of life (Gen. 18:11; 24:1; Josh 13:1; 1 Kings 1:1).

II. HIS BIRTH ANNOUNCED. **8. And it came to pass that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course—His course was the eighth in order.**

9. According to the custom of the priests' office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord—The whole number of priests was about 20,000, and so this much-coveted office was not permitted to anyone a second time. The celebrant was chosen by lot each morning and evening. For the altar of incense see Ex. 30:1-10. For the composition of incense see Ex. 30:34, and for its symbolic meaning see Ps. 141:2; Mal. 1:11; Heb. 9:4; Rev. 8:3, 4. King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy for usurping this sacred function (2 Chr. 26:18). "The temple"—R. V. marg. "the sanctuary"—the shrine, or Holy Place. Here stood the golden table with shew-bread on the right, or north side, and the golden candlestick on the left. As the number of priests was very large, some say 20,000, this lot would not likely fall to anyone twice in a lifetime.

10. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense—This would indicate that the day in question was a Sabbath or some high day. The worshippers assembled in the outer courts were engaged in silent prayer while the incense was being offered (Rev. 8:1-4; Isa. 66:7; Neh. 11:17; Matt. 21:13).

11. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord. Scripture assures us that we are surrounded with angels who minister to our welfare, and it is not strange if on fitting occasions they should become visible (Godet). That this was not a vision arising out of the exalted spiritual condition of Zacharias is evident from his fear, his unwillingness to believe the message and the physical infirmity that followed. Luke dwells more than any other of the evangelists on the ministry of angels. Compare the births of Isaac, Samson and Samuel. **Standing on the right side of the altar of incense** This may refer to the position of the altar itself—he stood on its right, or south side; or, as most understand it, to the position of Zacharias—at his right hand, therefore, on the north side of the altar, between it and the table of shew-bread. The right was regarded as the propitious side (Mk. 16:5; Matt. 25:33). The fact that Zacharias noted so accurately the exact position of the angel vouches for his clearness of perception and sobriety of mind. (Van Oosterzee).

12. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him—The fear of Zacharias proceeds from the consciousness of sin, which is immediately awakened in the human mind when a supernatural manifestation puts it in direct contact with the divine world. (Godet). (Judges 13:22; Dan. 10:7-9; Ezek. 1:28; Mark 16:8; Acts 10:4; Rev. 1:17).

13. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son The reference is to the prayer then and there offered by Zacharias. We do not think that this prayer was for a child to himself for (1) it would have been unbecoming for the officiating priest, in such a solemn function, voicing the prayers of all Israel, to introduce such a private matter; (2) he would probably have ceased, by this time, to pray for what, by the laws of nature, God seemed finally to have denied him; and (3) his incredulity at the angel's announcement is proof that he did not look for such a communication. On the other hand it is urged that the natural suggestion of the angel's words is that a certain definite prayer for a son receives a precise answer. Still we prefer to think that the burden of his prayer at such a time was, "O that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion" (Ps. 14:7). **And thou shalt call his name John**—(*The grace of Jehovah*). Same as Johanan (1 Chr. 3:24), and Jonah (Matt. 16:17, comp. John 1:42 R. V.).

14. And thou shalt have joy and gladness—Rather "exultation" (verse 44; Acts 2:46; Heb. 1:9). **And many shall rejoice at his birth**—Many shall have reason to be glad that he was born. His preaching would awaken repentance and lead them to the Saviour. The personal influence of John was short-lived, but the angel views his brief ministry as part of the Messianic kingdom.

III. HIS CHARACTER DESCRIBED. **15. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord**—This indicates the spiritual nature of his office and influence (Alford). A greatness from personal holiness and the moral authority accompanying it. (Godet). (Luke 7:28). **And shall drink neither wine nor strong drink**—The Nazirite vow is prescribed in Num. 6:2-21. It involved (1) abstinence from wine and strong drink; (2) refraining from cutting the hair off the head during the whole continuance of the vow; (3) the avoidance of contact with the dead. There is no mention of any Nazirite before Samson (Judges 13:4, 5), who with Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11) were the only two life long Nazirites mentioned in the Old Testament. (Easton). "Strong drink" includes all kinds of fermented liquors not made from grapes. Wyclif translates the word "cider." The word is specially applied to palm wine. The art of distilling alcohol was unknown to the ancients. **And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb**—The contrast between the false and hateful excitement of drunkenness