

# Some Lessons From Zacharias

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*God's people need to come to a settled position on His real purpose and be willing to move beyond their traditional understanding and limitations to fulfill His ultimate intention.*

**Scripture:** Luke 1:5

**Topics:** "Faith in God's New Work", "Overcoming Spiritual Pride"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that God's purpose for His people goes beyond their current state, as illustrated by the story of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Despite their faithful service, God had a greater plan that required them to be open to His new work, represented by the coming of John the Baptist. The sermon warns against spiritual pride and the dangers of relying solely on established traditions, which can obstruct God's new movements. Sparks encourages believers to trust in God's ability to act beyond human understanding and to remain pliable to His will, lest they lose their testimony. Ultimately, the message calls for a deeper faith that embraces God's full purpose, even when it challenges conventional wisdom.

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## Transcript

Reading: Luke 1:5-25,57-67.

The Lord is ever desirous of making His people know His real purpose in fulness concerning them. We need to come to a very settled position on this matter. It is not a question of how the Lord's people may be at any given time. It may be that, as we have read here concerning Zacharias and his wife, and the people gathered there at that time, conditions are fairly good. We might think that this is quite a beautiful picture, that is just how things ought to be. There is the servant of the Lord correctly and faithfully fulfilling his ministry. There is the temple order being carried on correctly; there are people gathered in the court, apparently in a great company, giving themselves to prayer. There is a spirit of devotion, and other characteristics, which present a picture which might be thought to be perfectly satisfactory.

But it is not a matter of whether at any given time things are apparently quite good, answering to much that the Lord has shown to be His mind, or whether things are maybe not so good, or even bad, as has been the case at times with the people of God. The point is always: Is this, after all, what God really has as His end concerning His people? It may be very good, and yet it may after all be only comparative - for that is the upshot of this very incident. It was good, yes, but it was not all that God wanted. God had something more than that in view, however good it might be. The thing that governs all the way along is the full

thought of God from the beginning, and until you and I have settled that, we have not settled many things. What we need to ask is: What more is there that is yet required by the Lord for completeness, for fulness?

And so our object must be, not to seek the comparatively good, not some more, some extra, some further light and truth, but to be with the Lord for His ultimate, His full, His final, His complete intention. The peril is to look upon what is very good and has the blessing of the Lord upon it, and settle down, and say, 'Well, why want any more than that, why not be content, why not just get on with that? Why not leave aside all the other questions, those disturbing questions, very disturbing questions, and just get on with what is so obviously quite good in the blessing of the Lord?' No, the Lord shows by His Word, Old Testament and New Testament, that there is still something ahead, still something more, and it has never been the Lord's way to let His people settle down with anything less. That is what is brought to us so clearly here.

### God's New Thing

Let us look at this story again. The traditional order is being followed out meticulously. The priest is doing his work, the people are gathered to prayer, the temple routine is being pursued, the service of God is going on. And then, right in the midst of that, God breaks in from Heaven, and He makes it clear that He is purposing to take a further step forward in relation to the promised Messiah. God is here seen to be taking another step, and a very big step this time, in relation to His Son Jesus Christ. This story can be gathered very largely into those words of the seventeenth verse - "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord". But all this - the temple, the services, the priesthood, the people - was not this a state of preparedness for the Lord? The story says, 'No - only comparatively.' Something more and something else is required. John the Baptist must come in. Another very definite step by God is about to be taken.

Now God has always appointed to move toward His end along the line of priesthood, and all that that means, and so, in taking this further step, God moves in the direction of His appointed way, and, consistently with this, He makes His mind and His intention known. He lets the priesthood know, quite definitely, quite clearly, quite precisely, what His thoughts and His intentions are.

And He is immediately confronted with an obstruction. Right in that very place He finds His difficulty. Just where He ought to have a clear way, He finds the way is blocked. In the very midst of that which bears His Name, which stands in the long tradition of Divine things, He meets His main difficulty. A difficulty arises instantly with Zacharias - in the very priesthood, in the very house of God, and in the order of things which obtains - and it is almost an affront to Him.

### No Natural Ground of Confidence

Now, what were the features of this obstacle, this rebuff to the Lord? For it was nothing less than a rebuff that the Lord met here. If we could really catch the tone of Zacharias, I am sure we should discern something that was a challenge to the Lord, a question. What were the features of it?

First of all, this thing that God is making known, this thing that God purposes to do, has no natural ground whatsoever upon which to rest confidence. That is very searching. The whole matter of confidence arises. The first question raised is: 'Can we be sure? What about the reliability of this thing?' People begin at once to look round for the ground of confidence, and if they do not find it according to their established ideas, then this thing is doubtful, it is open to question. This is not in the recognized and established way.

That is what arises with Zacharias and Elisabeth. The recognized, the established way, is the way of nature. But the way of nature has no place here at all. It is quite in another realm. Elisabeth's childlessness, and their advanced age - it all puts aside any kind of hope, any ground of confidence, so far as the natural is concerned. And therefore, it not being according to what has always been, and what is always regarded as the right way, the regular way, the natural order - therefore it is a doubtful proposition, and even God has that doubt presented to Him. 'This is not according to tradition, this is not according to what we have always been led and taught to believe to be God's way of doing things. This is so out of the usual!' Is that an argument with God? Let us pursue it.

'This is far too spiritual, this is far too otherworldly, this is far too much for the earth! This makes demands for factors altogether beyond our comprehension!' Is that an argument to present to God? When God is going to do a new thing, has He to confine it to human understanding, even to the understanding of religious tradition at its best? Has He ever done it? Must God reduce His infinite purposes concerning His Son to the comprehension of man's mind? Must He? Then it will become the measure of man and not the measure of God. But man finds this a point of great offence. It stumbled Zacharias and it stumbles the Lord's people. There is something in this that is altogether beyond us, something about this that we cannot grasp, we cannot understand. It is off the beaten track. It is not what we are used to, it is not what we have been accustomed to - so much argument. And because of that, because this thing is beyond us, beyond our comprehension and understanding, therefore it is doubtful, it is questionable.

Let us put this on the positive side. We have got to accommodate ourselves to the fact that the greatest things that God will ever do will always be beyond us, beyond our power of understanding, beyond our attainment in knowledge - even in the things of God. God is always going to take us out of our depth with His new thing. He is always going to prove that we in our own resources cannot follow Him, this is too much for us. God is making demands for which we can make no supply. He has got us completely out of our realm. That is God's way. That was the trouble with Zacharias, and so he presented God with this objection, this question. It was the fixed position of the traditional order of things that caused the difficulty with Zacharias.

### The Obstacle of Pride

And that fixed position had a very unfortunate effect. Think of the superiority and pride of Zacharias. He is in the presence of an archangel from Heaven - "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God" - who has come down right alongside of Zacharias, and made an announcement concerning the will of God, and Zacharias has the effrontery to call him into question, simply because his position is so fixed. 'It has always been like this - this is the understood way of things. This other is so much outside the realm of our understanding, and therefore....' What pride can be ours, when we think we have it all and know it all, and have our position so fixed that even God Almighty does not stand a chance, because we have boxed the compass of spiritual truth. We have got the whole thing so set, so fixed, that the archangel Gabriel cannot move us.

Is that not terrible? Here is the priesthood arguing with an archangel! But that is spiritual pride. It was for that that judgment fell upon Zacharias. It always does fall upon spiritual pride. God cannot tolerate spiritual superiority, this terrible lack of adjustableness and submission, such as was shown in Zacharias - in a member of the very priesthood. If only we were broken, if only we were pliable, if only we were open enough for the Lord to do what He wants to do, whether we understand it or not, whether it comes within the compass of what has been in the past or not, or what is new or not, and say, 'Lord, this is beyond me -

but, Lord, if You want to do it, I am with You for it', what things God could do, and how much more swiftly He could do them.

### Testimony Suspended Until Adjustment Made

In the incident before us, God went on, but the priest's ministry became merely formal, inarticulate and tentative, until the lesson was learnt. I said 'formal' - he finished his course and went home. It seems to say to me that Zacharias was only wanting to get this job done to go home. He had to stay it out, he had to go on with the routine of the thing; but it had become a mere performance, and he was longing for the day when he could just leave it and go home. "When the days of his ministration were fulfilled, he departed unto his house." The whole thing had become empty form, it had become inarticulate, dumb.

The point is this, that the real testimony was suspended until adjustment was made to the situation - until there was a recognition of the Divine, the heavenly, the spiritual, the supernatural, that which was outside of man's power of comprehension and execution. For, after all, the argument seems to have been, 'If we cannot do it, then it will never be done.' And that is very much the attitude of systematized religion. If it cannot do it itself in its own way, then the thing never can be done. And so the testimony is in suspense.

### The Obstacle of Convention

Now, when God moves from Heaven in relation to His Son and all those fulnesses which yet lie ahead concerning Him, what do we find? We find that His movements are not according to convention. Let that be settled. God does not move forward according to convention. God's great movements are always very unconventional movements. God refuses to be put into a box. He demands liberty to take us beyond any limits that we may impose upon Him. So often convention is God's main obstruction. The spiritual, the heavenly nature of God's developing movements is altogether beyond the understanding of men; and because man cannot understand it, he does not believe in it. He doubts it, he questions it, he throws suspicions upon it, he raises issues as to its soundness, if he cannot understand it, and therefore it is not acceptable to man, it is put aside.

### God's Act a Complete Break With the Natural

But note: the instrument to be used - in this case John the Baptist - is God's act, and wholly God's act, not man's. That is the issue of this thing. If God is going to do something peculiarly related to the final fulness of His Son, it will be His act, uniquely God's act. John the Baptist was God's act, not the act of Zacharias or Elisabeth, nor of them jointly, nor of any other means or instrumentality. "A man, sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6). 'He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth.'

And John, being God's act, represents a complete break with the natural. That is seen in his very name. The name (the Old Testament Johanan) means 'God's gift', or 'God's favour'. When he was born, all the people of tradition said, 'Of course, his name is Zacharias: that carries on the old tradition, that secures the future in relation to the past.' But Elisabeth, the principle of spiritual discernment, said, 'No, not at all. His name is to be John.' And when they asked Zacharias about it, he said, "His name is John!" 'We are not going to call him John - he is already called John.' It meant a complete break with tradition not to take his father's name. When God moves and raises up an instrument, so often it is a complete break with what men expect and demand.

Finally, if you do not accept it, if you do not believe it, if you do not come on to God's ground, that is an end of your testimony - you will be dumb. You may go on with your work, you may continue in the old system, but your days are numbered. You may uphold the old tradition, but in the true sense of testimony, you are dumb, you have not got a living message. The simple principle is of very wide application. If you do not believe God, then you have lost your testimony, and you will not have a testimony, and if you are dumb it is because somewhere or other you have doubted God, argued with God, answered back to God, tried to reason with God. A real living testimony comes of faith. As soon as we begin to allow questions as to God's ways and purposes, methods and means, we shall lose our testimony, we shall become silent, our ministry will go.

But that, as I say, is a very wide and far application. We must be in line with God in His full purpose, though we may not understand, it may be altogether beyond us and our resources. We may see in nature no hope or prospect at all: yet, knowing that God means this, we believe God, and our mouths are opened and the ministry is given. May the Lord teach us what this means.

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