

# A Case of Uncommon Devotion

by Victor Maxwell

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*The sermon highlights the story of Zacharias and Elisabeth, a devoted couple who walked with God in the midst of darkness and adversity, and teaches three principles about God's work in our lives.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 89:34, Isaiah 55:8, Habakkuk 2:3, Luke 1:5, Luke 1:68, Romans 4:20, Ephesians 5:18

**Topics:** "Faith And Doubt", "Gods Sovereignty"

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## Description

Victor Maxwell preaches on the uncommon devotion of Zacharias and Elisabeth during a dark period in Israel's history, highlighting their righteousness, faithfulness, and devotion to God despite their struggles with childlessness and societal stigma. Zacharias, a faithful priest, encounters an angel while performing his duties in the temple, facing doubts and ultimately being struck dumb due to unbelief. Through Zacharias and Elisabeth's story, we learn that our impossibilities are platforms for God's work, His delays are not denials, and His surprises are for His glory and our good.

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## Transcript

Studies in Luke #3 Luke 1:5-25 A Case of Uncommon Devotion David and Jonathan, Stephen and Joshua are very lovely and very popular biblical names. Not so with Zacharias in our culture. However this was one of the most common and popular priestly names in Israel. It just simply means "God remembers", It was a name of hope. As we mentioned last week, for four hundred years God had been silent. The continuing line of priests maintained the hope in Israel that one day Messiah would come, break through as the Sun of righteousness with healing in His wings.

Zacharias' wife was Elisabeth her name simply means, "His oath" When we put the two names together we find they are very appropriate "God remembers His oath!" When did God take an oath Psalm 89:34-37 records God's oath: "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven.

Selah". God swore an oath to David that one of his descendants would have an eternal reign. Christ is that descendant. "God remembers His oath!" God is ready to break through into human history after 400 years of silence. The statement, "In the days of Herod, the king of Judea" gives the time of this setting. According to the historian Josephus, Herod the Great died about the year 4 B.C., after having reigned for 36 years. By descent he was an Idumean but he had professed faith in the Jewish religion.

He was called the King of Judea because the title had been given to him by the Roman Senate. This infamous man became the puppet ruler of Judea and his entire reign was marked by bloodshed. A measure of popularity was obtained through the ornate buildings which he erected and by the renovation and beautifying of the temple. It was because of these constructions he gained the name, "Herod the Great." Nevertheless when he died, everybody within the nation breathed a sigh of relief for he was unwanted by his family and hated by his people.

Thus, the term "in the days of Herod, the King of Judea" refers to one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. (a) The voice of God had not spoken through a prophet for four centuries; (b) The spiritual life of the nation had gone into steep decline, Certain leaders had endeavoured to lift their standard of defiance, their efforts had more or less been in vain. (c) The land and people had been conquered by the Romans and they lived in political, social and spiritual bondage.

It was when righteousness appeared to be a forgotten virtue, God began to work. It is well to remember that often the darkest hour is just before the dawn. God began to work with one man and his wife. Although Zacharias was a common name, yet this man was most uncommon. It was in the darkest hours of the Herodian reign, that we are introduced to a couple who walked against the trend of the times. "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

I feel this is one of those marriages solemnized in Heaven "Both of them were upright and devout", They were both walking in the same direction, for the same destination, shared the same communion. For they enjoyed household salvation. There is much we could say just here. Let me stop and mention first of all this fact reflects a decision they once made. This is directed to young people. You are at an impressionable age. Many of you are finding your life's partner. Make sure they are going in the same direction and enjoy the same salvation.

It is disobedience for a Christian to marry a non Christian. The second thing I would like to mention reflects delight and the joy of household salvation. Some of you are Christians and your partner is not. There is a division in this respect. First be sure the Bible defends your marriage. It not only instructs us to keep on praying and living for the Lord but God says he sanctifies the unsaved partner - makes him or her a candidate for salvation. Can I appeal to those who are the unsaved partners in a relationship.

You love your wife or husband but you are not walking in the same direction. If that does not trouble you can I just remind you of the different destinations. Heaven and hell. Heaven is characterized by reunion. Hell is characterized by remorse. Heaven by happiness - hell by its horrors. Hell is all that heaven is not. Don't you think that if you were prepared to share your life with the one you love you would think of sharing eternity with him or her. I am not advocating that there are marriages in heaven - that is another matter.

But there is a heaven and there is a hell. Thirdly, this reflects the devotion of this household. Zacharias and Elisabeth were devoted. They loved the Lord for they walked in all His commandments. They were not perfect. They sinned but repented and kept on walking with God. What a happy home. You would think so. "But they had no children, for Elizabeth was barren, and both were well-on in years". Although they walked with God yet shadowing the life of Zacharias and Elisabeth were the bleak clouds of sorrow and shame.

We are presented here with one of the strange anomalies of life which have challenged the righteous throughout the ages. Why is it when we walk with God that certain things happen. I wish I had all the answers. To be childless was practically a disgrace for a Hebrew woman, and Elisabeth had no children.

No parental pride swelled their hearts with joy. There was only emptiness and barrenness. Any involuntarily childless couple can understand Zacharias and Elizabeth's silent sorrow as time slowly erased their hopes of pregnancy.

To make matters worse, a social and spiritual stigma was attached to childlessness in those days. It was said by the Jewish Rabbis that seven people were excommunicated from God and the list began, "A Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife and who has no child". Childlessness was a valid ground for divorce. Sufficient to say this that in spite of the darkness of the times, they walked with God. In spite of the derision of society, they walked with God. In spite of the difficulties of times, they walked with God.

There was not blame accorded to God and no backsliding away from God. What a couple. They were characterized by devotion. 1. Zacharias' Devotion as a Priest A Priest was a minister who looked after the upkeep of the Temple. In Zacharias' time, the priesthood bulged with more than twenty thousand members divided into twenty-four divisions, and "each division was on duty twice a year, for a week on each occasion". During one of Zacharias' weeks of temple duty, he, by "lot - or by chance", was chosen to burn the incense.

To be the offering priest was an honour which some priests never received and none were permitted more than once. As the sacrificed animal burned outside, the offering priest poured incense over a live coal on the altar within the Holy Place. As the smoke arose, he prayed some set prayer for the blessing, peace, and messianic redemption of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Zacharias had looked forward to this moment his entire life. All alone in the sacred chamber, the Holy Place, he carefully observed each step of the liturgy, while "the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside" (v.10) Inside, as Zacharias approached the altar.

Before him rose the richly embroidered and colourful curtain of the Holy of Holies. On one side was the table of shewbread and on the other the lights burned on the golden candlestick. Waves of heat rose from the glowing embers. Impassioned prayers flowed out of his priestly soul-prayers for his people, prayers for himself. With one motion, he lifted the censer and let its contents spill over the coals, enveloping him and his petitions in a billowing, ambrosial cloud. Suddenly, through the mist, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. (v.11) (a) In his duties he was faithful (b) In his doubts he was fearful 2.

Zacharias' Devotion as a Parent He is dumb - It did not take long to offer incense but it does take time with angels! Normally when the ministering priest emerged he led the people in praise. He could not for he was stricken dumb. Unbelief is always dumb. Zacharias was living in the backwash of his own limitations, and he couldn't foresee the marvels that God wanted to do for him if he only believed. Using the emphatic first person in Greek, ego, Luke boldfaces Zacharias' doubt-"For I am an old man".

But, employing the same word, ego, the angel silences the old man's excuse . . . and his tongue. "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which shall be fulfilled in their proper time". He is delighted The son of Elisabeth and Zacharias was to be a Nazarite. One of the things the Nazarite vowed was that he would not drink strong drink or wine.

He was to find his joy in the Holy Spirit and in God. That is the reason Paul, in Ephesians 5:18, says. "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit". Get your joy from God, not from a bottle. There are a lot of bottle-babies today. I am not speaking of crib babies but of adult babies hanging

over a bar. And there are some Christians today who have to be pepped up and hepped up in order to face life. We need to recognize that the Holy Spirit of God can give us the strength to face life.

Zacharias' Devotion as a Prophet 1:68-79 Zacharias prophecy takes the form of prose and song. It is generally known as the Benedictus His declaration about the Saviour His declaration about the his son (c) His declaration about salvation. When it comes to understanding the ways God works, Zacharias and Elizabeth's story teaches three principles. 1. Our impossibilities are the platforms upon which God does His best work. Have you begun to lose hope that a certain family member will change his or her ways If you're unemployed, do you sometimes wonder whether you will ever find a job Remember, nothing frustrates God.

When the night looks the bleakest, He does His best work. It may take time, though, so we must also remember this next principle. 2. God's delays are not necessarily His denials. God's, "Wait" does not necessarily imply, "No". He may simply be saying, "Not right now". So, rather than letting His delays cause doubt, let them cause growth in your life. During the wait, experience to the fullest what trusting Christ really means. 3. When God intervenes, His surprises are for His glory and for our ultimate good.

Like Zacharias, you may pray a long time for something only to have God answer your prayers in an unusual and unexpected way. How would you react Would you doubt His ability to do the impossible after so many years of waiting Instead, be like Elizabeth, who accepted God's gift graciously, even though it came later than she hoped. It may be a surprise to you, but to God, it's just a part of His sovereign plan.

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