

"In Those Days...A Silence Was Broken"
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"In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (Luke 1:5-25)

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People seemed to be conflicted because most hate those moments of "awkward silence" and yet long for some "peace and quiet". One interrogation technique used by prosecutors and police is to ask the suspect a question, allows the suspect to answer the question, and then to follow up the suspect's answer with...silence. Suspects when confronted with silence will oftentimes begin to add or embellish their answer to fill the void that a period of awkward silence creates. When I'm confronted with God's silence (His silence from my perspective), how do I normally try to fill that void? Explain.

Pastor Wally spoke of the remnant of Israel found in Ezra and pointed out that Israel had returned to their old ways ("And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets,

saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’” Ezra 9:10-13). What does it take for me to be able to confess my sins to God as Ezra did when he “...rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, saying “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens” (Ezra 9:5-6, emphasis added)?

If I don't “hear” from God when I've prayed about some issue in my life, do I ever believe that God has rejected my prayer by His apparent silence? If so, why so? If not, why not?

When it comes to prayer, the psalmist said in Psalm 116:1-6 “I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: “O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!” Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.” The New Bible Commentary clarifies that “[t]he situation was one of deadly threat, brought about by human deceitfulness and personal lack of discernment. But into this situation came prayer. The Lord listens (1-2), is gracious (bestows favor on the undeserving), righteous (never deviates in his commitment to his people and promises) compassionate (is emotionally moved by their plight) (5)...” In Zachariah's case, because of the social and economic “shame” associated with not having children, it's probably safe to assume that Zechariah had repeatedly prayed for children for years and years. Once he became “an old man”, he probably stopped mentioning the subject at some point in time. He may have even decided that it must not have been God's will that he ever become a father. So, what does Gabriel's announcement that “Your prayer has been heard” tell about the prayers of Zachariah, of my prayers, and God?

If God doesn't give up on me (and He doesn't), do I at times give up on Him? If so, in what way(s)? If not, why not?

The altar of incense where Gabriel appeared to Zachariah was placed before the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. On the other side of the veil was the Ark of the Testimony, where the presence of God was (Exodus 25:22). Aaron was instructed to burn incense on the altar each morning and at twilight, every day, as a regular offering to the Lord (Exodus 30:7–8). No priest was allowed the honor more than once in his lifetime, and many were never fortunate enough to be chosen at all. The priest went in by himself and made the offering, while the people waited outside in an attitude of prayer until he reappeared and dismissed them with a benediction. Burning incense is associated with prayer (“And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel” (Revelation 8:3-4). What does this say regarding the “holiness” of prayer and why?

Can I know that my prayers are “holy” and if so, how?

Zachariah was struck mute because he “...did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” Have there been promises that God has made me for which I should be made “silent and unable to speak” because of my doubt or disbelief? Explain.

Gabriel gave Zachariah some marching orders when it came to the upbringing of John. People oftentimes like to remind others that kids don’t come with an instruction manual...but is that true? God has given me some marching orders regarding raising children. Among others, see: Proverbs 22:6, Ephesians 6:4, Proverbs 13:24, Colossians 3:20-21, Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Proverbs 13:22, Proverbs 23:13, Isaiah 54:13, Deuteronomy 4:9, Deuteronomy 11:19. So, if I’ve got children, how well am I doing?

It seems to me that Elizabeth zigged when she should have zagged. “After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden saying, ‘Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.’” (See also Genesis 21:6-7, 1 Samuel 2:1-11, Genesis 30:23) Here’s a family who felt shame and probably was a source of gossip for years because they didn’t have children. That’s like getting a big promotion at work and then not letting anyone in your family know about it. How do I normally respond to God’s answer to prayer, if I respond at all and why? Explain.