

# A Higher View

Luke 1:5-17 | Bryce Beale | Nov. 4, 2018

The famous Italian poet Dante once wrote, “Reason, even when supported by the senses, has short wings.”<sup>1</sup>

Reason cannot get you very high, cannot give you a very clear perspective of your own life situation.

The eye of reason caught sight of Jesus when he walked among us—it saw him in the temple, it watched him in the synagogues. And it rejected him. Reason could see that Jesus was a man, even a great man, but it could never flap its way high enough to see that he was the God-man. It could see him walking from town to town on earth; it could not see him ascending back to heaven where he was before.

God has gifted us all with the capacity to think, to postulate and conclude, and by means of the mind we run businesses and forecast the weather and govern countries. By means of reason we have put an end to many illnesses and improved our quality of life. We have sent men and women lightyears away, to uninhabited realms of space.

But that is as far as we can go. Reason with her short wings has helped us upward a distance, but beyond that we cannot fly.

Reason can dissect the brain and say, “This lobe controls our memory.” But if we ask, “Well, why do we have memory in the first place? Who designed it and put it in our brains, and why?” the answer is too high for reason’s wings to reach. They are exhausted, they cannot take us into those heights.

“Who was Jesus?” Reason can say, “Jesus was a Jew of ancient Palestine.” “And what was his profession?” “He was a carpenter.” So far so good. But then we ask, “Was Jesus God?” And reason says, “I cannot fly high enough to see.”

For only faith can take us high enough to answer the questions in life that matter most. Reason can say, “You have lost a loved one.” But what of the greater questions, like, “Will I see this loved one again? Does their death mean anything? Was it a random accident, did it have any deeper purpose than the pain it caused?” Reason rests her wings—but faith flies to these heights.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 2.56-57, qtd. in Robert Luis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT; London, England: Yale University Press, 2003), Kindle ed., loc. 9-10.

Our most common problem as the people of God is our tendency to reason—and reason well, I say—but without faith. We walk around in the corn maze of our lives and think we understand how everything is put together. But really we do not have the height to look down, by faith, and see the shape the corn maze is in.

It is easy to see the ways in which we suffer, but when it is not easy to understand why God permits us to suffer in these ways, when our reason cannot fly high enough to see any sensible shape to them all, we conclude, by reason, that God is unjust, or absent, or some such nonsense. We have tried to make reason go where only faith can take us.

As we begin this morning the story told by Luke, we have a story on two levels. There is the story as it seems, or as reason sees it, which is rather bleak; but then we have the story as it actually is, as faith displays, and which is revealed in this case by an angel. My goal this morning is to divide the narrative in two, and to use it as a case study in our own troubles. How do we move beyond the things that seem to be, into the things that are?

#### **LUKE 1:5-17**

Here is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke has kept his promise to recount the story of Christ in an orderly way, and so he starts at the beginning, before the birth, not of Jesus, but of Jesus' forerunner John.

And here we have, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, the two views by which we can look at our own lives—from the ground, or from the air. There is a way that Zechariah's life looks and seems; and then there is a way that Zechariah's life is. By examining these both, I pray God may help us to see if we are taking in all the facts of our own lives, if we are being merely reasonable in how we think of our stories, or if we are, as Christians, making our conclusions by faith.

### How it seems

First, then, how does the situation seem from the ground?

#### Just any priest

See verse 5: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah."

There is a word in the original that does not come through well in the English—the King James translates it "certain:" "a certain priest." It is there, and it tells us something about Zechariah—namely, it tells us he was no one of any great importance. He was just any old priest.

In King David's day the priesthood was divided into twenty-four parts, and the eighth of those twenty-four divisions was called by the name of its forefather, Abijah. Abijah was not the first of the twenty-four divisions—the noble Jew Josephus would boast shortly after these days that he came from the first of these divisions.<sup>2</sup> But Zechariah did not. He was from the eighth. There was no great importance attached to that division.

He was just a certain priest, one of about 18,000 at the time, it is guessed. And he was not the High Priest, just a priest.

He was not distinguished—no, he stands in stark contrast to Herod mentioned in verse 5. These are the days of “Herod, king of Judea.” Notice, there is no “certain” here—it is not a certain Herod, just any Herod. This was Herod the Great—that was what they called him! He worked his way up to the throne; he killed off many who opposed him, and would attempt to kill the infant Jesus too. His sons would rule over the land after his death—the most famous of them, Herod Antipas, we will meet again when he imprisons John the Baptist and beheads him. His grandson and great grandson we will find in Acts. Yes, this Herod the Great is the patriarch of a mighty house of Herods. He is set apart, unique.

But Zechariah is not.

Zechariah has no house at all. He “had a wife,” verse 5 continues, “from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.” But, verse 7, “they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.” It was likely the couple had longed for a child, had even prayed for one, as verse 13 may suggest. But there had been no remarkable conception, no moment of excitement at the news.

Because Zechariah was just a certain priest, just any priest, and he married just a certain Elizabeth.

Notice in verse 6, “And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” I suppose the pair was not much different from many of us—they are laboring to obey the Lord, they push through the pain of disappointment and continue on, day after day, year after year. Like Job they hold fast their integrity.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Now, I am not only sprung from a sacerdotal family in general, but from the first of the twenty-four courses...” *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 1.1 in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 1.

Even Zechariah's fifteen minutes of fame are, from the perspective of earth, rather common. See, beginning in verse 8:

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.<sup>3</sup>

Each of the twenty-four divisions of priests would serve twice in a year, for a week at a time, in the Jerusalem temple. But only once in a priest's lifetime were they given the opportunity to burn incense in the Holy Place before the Lord, either at the time of the morning or the evening offering. Zechariah was probably chosen to offer incense in the evening. Two weeks out of every year Zechariah could be found in the court of the temple; but now, and only now, he was to enter the temple itself and offer a pleasant aroma to the Lord.

But notice even here how he is chosen for this task, verse 9: "according to the custom of the priesthood [in other words, as they had done for century after century], he was chosen by lot." God does not speak as he did to Samuel, setting him apart for his own service. No, Zechariah is chosen by what appears to be random, like the rolling of dice. Lots are cast. Because this is not Samuel, this is just a certain priest, any priest.

From the view on earth, from the simple operation of reason, the choice looks random.

Really, reason at this point begins to question the whole thing. Why are lots necessary, if there is a God in Israel? And if this God is just and good, why are these two blameless persons—not perfect, certainly, but upright—why are they kept from the joys of parenthood, while other wicked persons have a large brood?

From the height to which reason can fly, she looks at the scene and is baffled. She doubts. She cannot understand. Zechariah is no more than one human among millions, one priest among thousands; he continues on in this religious system, which he has inherited from his forefathers, and he continues sincerely in it. But where is the God of this system? There is custom, there is ritual, there are lots.

But for four hundred years, God has not spoken. When the ink had dried on the final line of Malachi's prophecy, the inkwell dried up too. The glory departed. The prophets ceased. Heaven turned to bronze.

---

<sup>3</sup> Vv. 8-10 (ESV).

And four centuries deep into this void of silence, a certain priest does as the priests have always done.

Here then is the view from earth, the view that reason takes, and Christians are not immune to it.

We have some hopes and aspirations for our lives, and many of them are good, are they not? We plan out our course and can almost see ourselves down along the trail, with a happy family, or traveling the world, or working a steady job, or whatever it may be. We have anticipated some bumps along the way, but by and large we think we know what to expect. We have written out the script, and it all makes sense to our reasonable minds. This is how my life will go.

But then it doesn't go that way at all.

You can't conceive children. Ah, but everyone around you is having one after another, they are living the dream you had imagined for yourself, while you are being left behind. It makes no sense. You think, "Am I sinning in some way, that God has closed my womb or my wife's womb?" Yet Zechariah and Elizabeth were blameless and could not conceive.

Or you are fired, or given a diagnosis, and the script goes through the shredder. The chaos which you see on the news only compounds the sense that God is far away, and that the world you inhabit is pure misfortune. Maybe you basked in the sunlight of God's favor early in your walk with him and saw his heart in every flower, his might in every mountain, but now you are watching the world through grayscale glasses. You are looking at your life and circumstances from the perspective of mere reason.

And you think, "I am just one small and insignificant person living out my days in a world of chaos and confusion."

Reason flaps its wings hard as it can, but cannot get any higher than that. And that is, in many ways, the underlying philosophy of our day.

## How it is

This is how it seems. But we are only halfway through our text, for now we must move beyond mere reason. We must go higher.

We have seen how life seems, for ourselves and for Zechariah—but now, by faith, we must consider how life actually is.

The move from "how it seems" to "how it is" in our text occurs in verse 11: "And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense."

Well, that changes things, now doesn't it?

But in another sense, it changes nothing. The angel—Gabriel, as we will learn later—is only a messenger. His only task is to tell Zechariah how things really are, from the perspective of heaven. He is not bringing some miracle that will make Zechariah's life meaningful; he has been sent by God to tell Zechariah that his life is meaningful, that God has some great purpose even for his suffering.

And so he begins with a sort of summary of his message. The old priest is startled to have his reason broken into by something higher, so, verse 12, "Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him." But Gabriel replies, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard."

There is so much in this summary!

Over and over in the Old Testament and right up through the new, when God or his angel or his Son appears to people, the people are afraid. And rightly so! But over and over the first words to them are, "Do not be afraid." Sometimes they are afraid because they stand before a great being—to them that being says, "Don't be afraid." Other times their fear is rooted in the circumstances of their life, yet even still the same words are heard: "Don't be afraid."

Notice that the angel stands, in verse 11, at the right side of the altar. Probably this detail is given because the right side is the side of blessing, of good. This angel brings good news of great joy. Verse 14: "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." Yes, this is an angelic majesty standing before poor Zechariah, but all the power Zechariah fears in that being is not set against him, but for him. It brings him good news. And so, he should not be afraid.

That is the first word we hear when our minds move their way above mere reason up into the realms of faith. While down here, we are afraid. We fear our circumstances, we fear the apparent distance of God. We have our many doubts; we wonder if our lives will count for anything. Does our suffering have meaning?

And when God grants us to believe, first our fears are assuaged. First we hear, "Don't be afraid."

But why?

Well, see the angel's summary again: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." In other words, Zechariah, you may seem like just any priest in a world void of God, but that is only how you seem. In reality, God knows your name. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah." And God has heard your prayer all along. It is possible the angel here

refers to an earlier prayer by Zechariah for a child, before he was too old to expect one. Or maybe the angel means that Zechariah's prayer for Israel, as he offered incense, that God would favor and accept Israel, was heard. In either case, the point is that God is not absent, and has not been absent. He has simply been acting behind the scenes. He knows exactly what is going on, and has written the script for it, and is ensuring that all goes according to that script. God never forgets us, he always remembers. Reason cannot understand this, but faith can.

So that is the summary: "Don't be afraid—God knows you, he has been listening all along, he has a purpose for what he does."

So now let us see that purpose. We fly higher still, and faith sees only more and more. Gray turns to brilliant colors.

...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.<sup>4</sup>

When faith appears, then all becomes clear. This is often how we experience our own trials: we live them through from man's perspective and cannot seem to find God anywhere in them. Then we pass through them, and looking back we find him everywhere. Think of our own text so far—look back and see God, though silent, in every part of it. In verse 6, Zechariah and Elizabeth are "both righteous *before God*." In verse 8, Zechariah "was serving as priest *before God*." They were living in his presence, though they could not see or hear him.

And as we will now see, the lot that fell to Zechariah could not have fallen otherwise. It was directed by the invisible hand of God.

How do we know? Well, we know when we turn our attention to John the Baptist, the son promised to them.

No doubt Zechariah and Elizabeth were well acquainted with the Scriptures, but their lives seemed so far removed from what they read there. These two were just run-of-the-mill believers, not great persons like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, not a great prophet like Daniel, who

---

<sup>4</sup> Vv. 13-17.

faced lions by faith and lived. This was just a certain priest and his barren wife, both of them advanced in age, past the prime of life.

But we have the privilege of looking back from higher ground, to see the landscape more clearly.

Why should Elizabeth, this righteous woman, pass so many lonely years without a child of her own? Reason cannot tell. But faith has an answer: What if God wanted to glorify his own name by wrapping an impossibility in something that can't be done, and then doing it? What if he meant to do by Elizabeth what he also would do by Mary—to take a woman who cannot biologically conceive, and work a miracle in her womb. Mary was a virgin and could not have a child; but Elizabeth was both barren and too old to bear. Reason sees the pain; but faith see the purpose.

And what if God had been setting up history in such a way that all of its most important points would point in this direction? What if Zechariah and Elizabeth were not living lives far removed from the stream of Scripture, but at its outlet, where its rivers converge and flow into the sea?

For only one other woman has ever been barren and past the age of childbearing, and yet conceived: Sarah, the mother of the nation. Righteous Abraham was refused an heir until he was a century old, so that God's faithfulness might be proven. But Abraham and Sarah were types that pointed forward to something greater—they could not conceive, but God gave them the child of promise. They were, in one sense, a foreshadowing of Zechariah, this certain priest, this any old priest, whose son would be, verse 15, "great before the Lord."

What if there was good reason for the barrenness, not only of Sarah, but of the wife of every patriarch. Isaac's wife Rebekah could not bear; Isaac prayed and God opened her womb. Jacob's wife Rachel could not bear, but God remembered her and opened her womb as well. Could these possibly have prepared God's people, so that when Elizabeth's womb was opened, it would be clear she followed in God's long line of purpose, that she was to bear a son who would be great?

Or think again of Samson, that mighty judge of Israel. His mother was barren, but then an angel appeared to her and promised a child. Seem familiar? And that child grew up to be great. Could he have been another foreshadow of Elizabeth and her son? See verse 15: "And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." Samson himself was a Nazirite, one dedicated to God, from his mother's womb—which was why his mother was not allowed to drink wine or strong drink herself while she

was pregnant. And in his life Samson did many mighty deeds, but only when the Spirit of God was upon him.

Move through the Scriptures and find another figure, Hannah. She is barren, and prays for a child in the temple. Her prayer is heard, her womb is opened, and she gives birth to Samuel the great prophet, whom she then dedicates to God's serve. Could this be another picture of someone greater to come?

Faith looks even further. Now it sees Elijah, the greatest of the prophets of old. He goes about in the wilderness preaching righteousness; he wears a leather belt, and a garment of hair, and labors to turn the sons of Israel from their idols unto God. And when he departs from this earth, he leaves a double portion of his spirit to Elisha, giving him great power.

Now look to our text, in verses 16 and 17:

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.

In Malachi, the final book of our Old Testament, the final words of God before the four hundred years of silence, we are told that a true priest is a messenger of God.<sup>5</sup> And then we read, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me."<sup>6</sup> This echoes Isaiah 40, which says a voice will appear in the wilderness to prepare God's way. But notice, here the messenger is compared to a priest. Who is this priestly messenger? We find our answer in the last verses of Malachi, the final lines of the Old Testament:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.<sup>7</sup>

What is the connection between a priest, and Elijah the prophet, and a messenger who prepares the way of the Lord, who turns the hearts of fathers to their children—that is, restores family relationships—and who urges repentance upon Israel?

---

<sup>5</sup> Mal. 2:7.

<sup>6</sup> 3:1.

<sup>7</sup> 4:5-6.

The connection is that they all point forward to a certain priest, just any priest, and his son John, who will prepare the way for the God-man, Jesus Christ. Now we see why Zechariah must be a priest. Now we know why “he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.” Here is a woman, Elizabeth, who is not only of Aaron’s line, but who is named after Aaron’s own wife. This is a priestly couple, for the messenger of Malachi, this Elijah, seems also to be priestly. That is at least how the Jews read that passage—their writings show that they expected Elijah to return as a high priest and bring the Messiah.

Now lastly, let faith direct our gaze to one more prophet, perhaps the most remarkable connection of them all.

An old man is praying on behalf of Israel, and at the time of the evening sacrifice the angel Gabriel appears to him. When the angel appears to him the next time the man is terrified, and Gabriel says to him, “Fear not...your words have been heard.” I am not speaking of Zechariah—this is Daniel. This is an event some five hundred years before Zechariah.

Daniel is in captivity in Babylon, the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. And the angel Gabriel says, “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.”<sup>8</sup> These seventy weeks are weeks of years—so, seventy times seven years, or 490 years. The angel tells Daniel that after the decree is given to rebuild the temple, then it will take one week of years, or 49 years, to rebuild. Then after that, there will be 62 weeks of years, and the Messiah will come and be cut off.

Many wrestle with the exact dates and math, but there is no doubt—between the time of this prophecy and the time of Zechariah is about five hundred years. And no one looks so much like Daniel in chapters 9 and 10 as this Zechariah, this certain priest.

## Conclusion

Reason can see what seems to be, but only faith can see what is. Zechariah seems to be insignificant, a single priest after four hundred years of silence. But Zechariah actually is the fulfillment of type after type, shadow after shadow, in the Old Testament Scriptures. His life is not random; his genealogy not haphazard. Even his suffering, his childlessness, has its clear purpose.

---

<sup>8</sup> Dan. 9:24.

His son would be great, would be the promised child, the priestly Elijah, the one who would introduce the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

I would not be surprised if you yourself, sitting here, have felt somewhat like God is distant, or that he is not working according to script. Perhaps your life has turned out far different from your expectations, and you wonder if God is guiding everything along after all. Will things turn out well, now that there is disease or distress?

You may feel that God has forgotten you.

But when you feel that way, remember this priest, just any priest really, Zechariah. Do you know what his name means? "The Lord has remembered."