

Called to Ministry

Class 2

Luke 1:5-25

Probably the most important key I have found in reading and understanding the Bible, is to read the text and notice the cross-references. I understand the NT, to be Jesus' commentary on the OT. So, if I am reading in the OT and I come to a cross-reference to the NT I stop and look it up and figure out why I was sent there...I try to understand the connection. It may be that I need to read more than a single verse, but I try to not be satisfied unless and until I feel I understand the connection. In these 'call narratives' of Luke and Acts you should do the same...and see what insights come to you from the cross-references. Notice as you read them how fluent these people are in the language and content of the Bible.

Hearing the calling stories of others can sometimes cast new light on our own calling. This is my goal for us in this class. The Bible teaches that God does nothing 'randomly' but does everything purposefully. We have been made a certain way for a reason. We were born to certain parents in a certain place at a certain time...for a reason. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is pictured in the Bible as the 'Maker of Heaven and Earth' and the sovereign King of Heaven and Earth. There are times in life when this is clearer than other times. Sometimes life seems simply to drift from one day to the next and those days seem much the same. But sometimes life seems to call into question the very promises and character of God. This was the somewhat sad situation for a priest named Zechariah. But notice that Luke tells Zechariah's story in the context of a much larger story. This too is a clue as to the meaning of life...life in general and the meaning of any one specific life in particular...including Zechariah's. We have just launched a study of the book of Leviticus at the Primetime Men's Bible Study at Schumacher Automotive this morning. Leviticus is named for the tribe of Levi, the tribe of the priests. Zechariah is of the tribe of Levi. Leviticus' name in Hebrew is Wayyaqira...the first word in the Hebrew text..."And he called"...Seems fitting for tonight's class on the subject of calling. Jesus was closest theologically to the Pharisees, the party of the Rabbis, and the Synagogues. The Pharisees believed that the book of Leviticus was not just for the priests and the Levites but for all who were serious about their faith and trusted Yahweh to keep his promises, among them that Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests. What Promises? The Promises of the Gospel

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Is 40:9 God is coming to rescue his people from exile

Is 52:7 God is coming to establish his Kingdom and rule over the nations

Is 61:1 God is coming to set the prisoners free, to cancel debts, to comfort the afflicted, and to declare God's Jubilee

Remember the four elements of a call

Divine epiphany Lk 1:11

Divine empowerment Lk 1:15b

Endowment with self-consciousness Lk 1:15a, which suggests he will be a lifelong Nazarite see Num 6:4-5

Explanation of mission Lk 1:17 referring to Mal 4:5

Zechariah had at least two things that disappointed him about his life. Can you name them? Besides personal disappointment why did these things have larger implications? Who are Elizabeth and Zechariah? Why do they matter? Why does her age matter? Why does his age matter? Hint: Remember last week's class.

Are Zechariah and Elizabeth pictured as good people or not? If they have been faithful their whole lives, what does their disappointment represent in terms of their faith? If there are blessings for obedience as the Bible says, 'Why has life turned out like this?' Does serving God really pay off or not? Is it worth it?

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Into this disappointed man's life comes the moment he had waited for his entire life and thought he would somehow never experience...It was his division's (the division of Abijah) turn for service in the Temple, they drew lots to see who would have the honor to burn the incense in the Holy Place before the veil. As he had many times before he drew a lot and this time just before his required retirement from the service in the Temple, the lot fell to him. Remember Num 8:25. Finally, after a lifetime of service, the Lord had chosen him! He would be the last of his family to serve in the Temple because he and Elizabeth were childless. This would be the pinnacle not only of his service but the end of the family's service in the Temple.

But his surprises were just beginning...The priests were divided into 24 divisions, each served for a week, twice a year. According to Josephus' figures, there were some 20,000 priests, who serve during the Festivals or Feasts of Israel. During the great festivals all of the divisions of the priests served. But only one priest would be chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place and burn the incense on the altar of Incense, symbolizing the prayers of God's people rising before him(see Rev 5:8), mingled with the Incense, symbolizing the Holy Spirit's intercession. Only one priest would do this each day. Zechariah was nearing the end of his years of active service, mandatory retirement was age 50. The selection was made by casting lots...a lottery. It appeared that he would never serve at the altar. But God had a plan for Zechariah and for his post-menopausal wife Elizabeth, who was also of the tribe of Levi but actually with a more prestigious pedigree...of the House of Aaron. But God had plans that exceeded their wildest dreams.

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The time came and Zechariah entered the Holy Place and approached the altar of Incense while the assembled congregation stood outside praying. But then something happened for which he was not prepared...he was supposed to be in there alone...but he was not! An angel stood next to the altar...we are told it 'troubled' Zechariah and he was afraid! No fooling!

But characteristically the Angel said, "Don't be afraid. Your prayer has been heard and the other great disappointment of your life will also be addressed...Elizabeth is going to have a baby boy, and you are to name him John." Then the angel begins to quote a series of Scriptures from the OT from Num 6:3; Judg 13:4; Jer 1:5; Mal 4:5 and identifies himself as the angel Gabriel, who visited Daniel and interpreted the visions chapters 7 and 9 to him.

Now believers in Zechariah's day knew that they lived in a pivotal time...they knew this from Daniel 9. Many thought in that time that the time of the Messiah's coming was at hand based on their interpretation of the 70 Weeks of years mentioned in Daniel. They believed they were nearing the end of the 69th week when Messiah, the Prince was to come. It is not a coincidence that this is the period of messianic expectation in the history of Israel, as at no other time. When Gabriel tells Zechariah he has been sent from the presence of God to bring him "Good News" this is a loaded term from the passages from Isaiah given above.

Then Zechariah makes a mistake...he asks for a sign...reminds me of the old joke of the Slow Disciple's first miracle...he made a blind lame. He was given a sign all right...unable to speak a word until the baby was born. This child would set in motion God's final rescue. You and I are the result.