



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613
(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG
WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

The Characters of Christmas, Part 1

Luke 1:5-17

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."

Well, in Luke's account of Jesus entering the world, he gives many quotes that Jesus shared with us when he was here on the earth. One of them is found later after Jesus began his earthly ministry in Luke chapter 12, verse 48, where he said these words, to whom much is given, much will be expected or required, to whom much is given, much will be expected or required. He said it again in a different way, accentuating this statement to those who have been entrusted much. Jesus said, much will be demanded. My son and I had an opportunity a week ago Friday to drive to Iowa City because I was invited to address the Hawkeye football team for a short chapel time in their Friday schedule. I've had the opportunity to do this numerous times since my son played football there, and I always consider it a great honor and privilege to go back into the complex there, be with the team a little bit and speak to them about spiritual things. And as we were driving there, this verse kept going through my mind because I was thinking about what it's like for a young man to be entrusted with a college sports jersey, to wear the entrustment of being invited onto a college team. In our culture, where sports is so exalted, watched popular, it's so intriguing to so many people. And so my bent to speak to the young man was speaking to them about what they have been entrusted when they're invited to wear a jersey for the

Hawkeye football team, and then what is expected of them when they are given this entrustment or this privilege.

Certainly, the giving of a jersey is not the only thing that comes with being recruited to a football team. For many of them, their schooling gets paid for. Now, in this day and age, some of them make far more money than just room, board and tuition. They're given a lot of money when they're handed that jersey. They're also given a lot of influence in the world because of the way our world works and the idolatry of sports. All of the sudden, if you wear a jersey for a sport team at a high level, doors open to you that might not have opened to you had you not been recruited by one of these teams. And so we talked for a little bit about to whom much is given. And then we talked about what is expected. The expectations for these players is quite extreme. If you've ever seen their schedule and what they're required to go through once they get recruited onto a team, the discipline that's needed, the expectations for them academically, the expectations for them in their diet, the expectations for them in their weight, the expectations for them in the weight room and in the workout center, the expectations for them on game day. There is a lot of expectations to whom much is given, much is expected, Jesus said.

And this is of course, true in the spiritual realm. And this had me thinking about the characters of Christmas and these ones that God invited to be a part of his, ushering in his child into the world as the Savior of the world. And then this had me thinking about us here at Nazareth, and what we've been entrusted by God and what we're stewarding before him. And then this had me thinking about me as an individual and what God has entrusted to me in life. And what does God expect of me? Not just of me, but of us in this community. And all of this was, I believe, being put on my heart by the Lord to just be paying attention to him and listening for what he wants from me and what he wants from us as his people here in the world at this time, in this place in history. As we go through the characters of Christmas, we're talking today about the angels. They were messengers who brought good news to individuals and to the world, but they also called individuals and entrusted them with a calling by God. We're going to talk about Zechariah next week, and then Joseph, and then Mary, and then at Christmas Eve, we'll talk about the key character in the Christmas story, The Christ Child. But today we're looking a bit at these messengers from God, these ones who were bearing this great news of hope for all humanity.

The ones who came to entrust certain individuals with massive responsibilities in the work that God was initiating here on the earth. The first mention of these characters is actually in our gospel reading from today. It's right here near the front of Luke's accounting of the arrival of Christ on the earth. And we just read it. It was the description of what was happening with Zechariah and Elizabeth in the time of King Herod. And in this time, Zechariah's group, his division of the priesthood was near the temple, and one of them was going to be chosen by lot to enter the temple. It was a responsibility, a high duty.

Not every priest got the opportunity to do this, but by lot in God's sovereignty at this time, Zechariah was chosen to enter into the Holy of Holies, to stand before the the incense and light. The incense candle. That would be a sign of being prayers being ushered before God, as the smoke would go up from the burning incense. We learn that Zechariah and Elizabeth had no child because Elizabeth was barren. And we also learned they were well advanced in years. The text says this when Zechariah entered this temple into the burning of incense altar, as the whole multitude was praying outside, there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar.

Now to believe the Bible is to believe in the supernatural, the unseen. When we speak of angelic beings, there is all kinds of revelation about them in the scriptures. And as I told the children, they are not these cute little creatures that we often use to represent angels here during Christmas time. Angelic beings are recorded in the scriptures as being majestic in their created design. There are tens and thousands of them, 10,000 times 10,000 of them in the unseen world. And I just want to remind you, the Bible tells us not to fix our eyes on what is seen, because that is temporary. But we should fix our eyes on that which is unseen, because that is eternal. Angelic beings are created by God sometime before human beings were created. We don't know if they've been there with God from the beginning, or if at some point in the past, eternity past. He brought them into being in some way, and they will be there forever. They are eternal beings created by God. They are in the unseen realm, and that which is unseen is eternal. And we are invited to fix our eyes by faith on the unseen world, because this world is just passing away. But in that world we will spend our eternity. And so to believe in the Bible is to believe in the existence of these unique, majestic creations of God of which their design and makeup is beyond our comprehension.

The Bible speaks of different kinds of angelic beings. There is the mention of cherubim. They are four winged, unique creatures that guard holy places in the unseen world, and some cherubim were given to guard the tree of life. After the fall of humanity into sin, so that we wouldn't eat from the tree of life and live forever in this state, because God designed for us to live in a better state, in a more pure, perfect and pure state. The Bible also speaks of seraphim that actually fly around the throne room of God. And they have six wings, and with two wings they cover their eyes, and with two wings they cover their feet, and with two they fly around the throne room of God, and they cry out day and night, worshiping the Lord. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. There is a majestic, powerful, unseen world revealed to us in the scriptures and these angelic beings. Some of them are given permission by God, even sent by God, to break the barrier between the unseen and the seen. We live in a scientific culture, and we have been trained to think that if you can't prove it, it's not true. But the revelation of Scripture is it is very true. There are angelic beings, spiritual forces behind what we see, having an effect on this world around us day and night. These angelic beings don't sleep. The Bible says our greatest struggle in the world is not against flesh and blood.

Other human beings, though we may think it is, sometimes we may be frustrated by the people around us. We may be hurt by evil that wells up in people's hearts. But our real struggle is not against flesh and blood, and it's not the struggle of the challenges we have living in a fallen world, striving to provide and also dealing with sickness and disease and death. These are temporary, momentary struggles that we all face. But the Bible reveals to us that our real battle is unseen. The Scripture reveals to us that there were some angelic beings that rebelled against God and were cast out of God's presence, and now roam the earth here. They've been stationed here by God. And Ephesians chapter six describes them in this way as the rulers and the authorities and the powers of this dark world. And in case we don't understand that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul with one more sentence that is very clear about our battle. Our real struggle in this life is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. You and I are living our lives not out on a playground, a neutral playground, but on a cosmic battle between good and evil. And into this world, God is preparing some 2000 years ago to invade it himself with Immanuel, God with us. And he's doing some work to prepare the way for his arrival. And so he sends some messengers to announce his initiative, his plan.

And that first messenger encounters Zechariah in the temple. On those days, thousands of years ago, there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled. Fear fell upon him. Now we don't know exactly what they look like, but I shared with the children this picture of angels. We know that they don't look like that. But if you did encounter an angel that looked like this, you might be a little bit nervous. We don't know exactly how big they are, but it makes sense that Zechariah would be a little bit afraid. The Bible tells us in the Psalms that we are created beneath the angels. So Zechariah is now encountering someone who is far more powerful than him. I don't think I have ever encountered an angel, but the Bible says we might encounter an angel and not even be aware of it at times. And I don't know exactly what's true in the testimony of angels from different people. But I do know that my neighbor at one point, two days before he died, was struggling a lot. And on the third day before he died, he woke up with a little extra spark in his heart, and he called his wife in and said, I just need to tell you, there were three angels that visited me last night. And she said, well, what did they say? And before he said what they said, he said they were robed in white with a blue sash over them.

And then he just simply said this, the most descriptive word, two days before he died. They were strong. They were strong. He said after sitting in there, his bedroom, for a little while. Two of them were here, one was over here, and this leader, Angel came over to him and told him to be patient because they weren't quite ready for him yet. And that's what he reported to his wife. It would be a little hard to believe, if not on the next night they visited again, and he described what happened to his wife that morning before he passed away. Zechariah is afraid. He's troubled. Fear fell upon him. The angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zechariah. 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. I don't know if you've ever been praying for something for

some time, but I can only imagine that Zechariah and Elizabeth, in their early years when they couldn't get pregnant, were asking God, God, would you give us child to raise? Would you entrust us with with a child? I don't care if it's a son or daughter, but God, give us a child.

But now they're well along in years. And I wonder if at some point they stopped praying for children. I know my wife and I, at 57 years old, if someone were to come to us and say, hey, I got good news for you, I got good news for you, you're going to have another child. I'm not sure we would be thrilled with the news. I don't know how old well along in years is, but I'm sure they're well beyond the childbearing years. And I don't know if any of you have ever raised children, but it's an enormous amount of work to raise a child. They're quite dependent on you for some time, and there's a lot of energy that's needed. I know this at 57, being a grandfather, I am so happy that I have grandchildren because they're easier. I don't carry the weight of responsibility for them day to day. I certainly enjoy them. But if you were to give me my own children again, I would have to gird up my loins to strengthen myself in the Lord to do that again. But I will just say this to you this morning if you've been praying something for a long time. Don't give up. Because sometimes God saves his best for last. In. Zechariah and Elizabeth are about to experience this. God always hears our prayers, even if he doesn't always answer them with yes. Sometimes it's weight and sometimes it's a surprise.