

Answered Prayer

Luke 1:5-17 (ESV)

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. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ 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.”

⁵ 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. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

In societies like Israel, in which a woman's value was largely measured by her ability to bear children, to be aging and without children often led to personal hardship and public shame.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Incense was burned in the temple twice daily. Lots were cast to decide who would enter the sacred room, and one day during that week Zechariah was chosen by lot. Offering the incense before the Lord was considered a great privilege. A priest was only allowed to do so once in his lifetime; many priests never had the opportunity.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

The right side indicates a position of favor or blessing. Only two angels are mentioned by name in Scripture—Michael and Gabriel—but many angels act as God's messengers. Here, Gabriel delivered a special message to Zechariah. This was not a dream or a vision; the angel was a royal herald of God. The angel appeared in visible form and spoke audible words to the priest.

¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ 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.

Angels bring God's messages to people, protect God's people, offer encouragement, give guidance, carry out punishment, patrol the earth, and fight the forces of evil. There are both good and bad angels.

That the Lord hears our prayers is a common theme in the Psalms:

Psalm 6:8-9 (ESV)

Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. ⁹ The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer.

Psalm 18:6 (ESV)

In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.

Psalm 28:6 (ESV)

Blessed be the LORD! For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.

Psalm 31:22 (ESV)

I had said in my alarm, “I am cut off from your sight.” But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help.

Psalm 34:6 (ESV)

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.

Psalm 34:17 (ESV)

When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

Psalm 40:1 (ESV)

I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

Psalm 55:17 (ESV)

Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.

Psalm 66:19 (ESV)

But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer.

Psalm 116:1 (ESV)

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.

Psalm 145:19 (ESV)

He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.

Proverbs 15:29 (ESV)

The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

Big Idea

God answers prayer in His own way and in His own time. He worked in an "impossible" situation—Elizabeth's barrenness—to bring about the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah. If you want to have your prayers answered, you must be open to what God can do in impossible situations. And you must wait for God to work in His way and in His time.

¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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.

That John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth, indicates a special distinction of this child. This also signals the restoration of the prophetic work of the Holy Spirit that had not been present in Israel for over four hundred years.

¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ 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.”

Through John's words, God would take stony hearts and exchange them for hearts that were soft, pliable, trusting, and open to change.

Ezekiel 11:19-20 (ESV)

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

With Malachi's death, the voice of God's prophets would be silent for four hundred years. Then a prophet would come, like Elijah, to announce Christ's coming. This prophet was John the Baptist. John prepared people's hearts for Jesus by urging people to repent of their sins. Christ's coming would bring unity and peace, but also judgment on those who refused to turn from their sins.

Closing Prayer