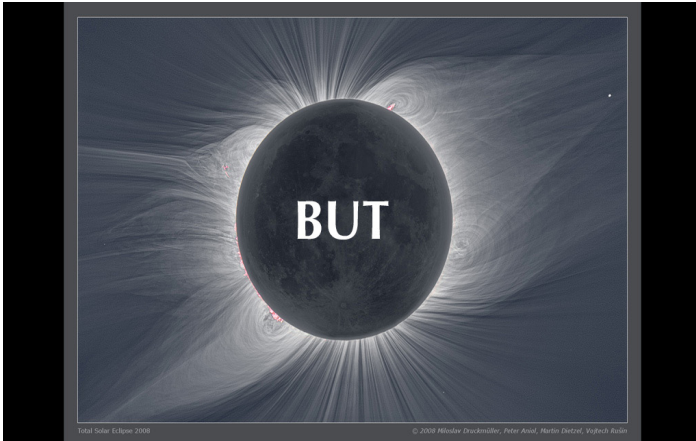


A vertical rectangular image showing a night sky over sand dunes. The sky is dark with a dense band of stars and nebulae, the Milky Way, stretching across the upper half. The lower half shows the silhouettes of sand dunes against the bright, star-filled sky.

Anticipation

A four part series leading up to
Christmas
Celebrating the season of
Advent



As we lead up to Christmas and the end of the year our thoughts often turn to hope; what we might find wrapped under the tree, time with family, food and fun, a change in circumstances for the new year – a better job, health or new relationship. Our hopes, however, are often crushed before they get off the ground with one word.

This week we start a new series taken from Luke Gospel as he carefully narates to us the the events leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas is about anticipation, and anticipation invloves preperation, however how many of us are truly prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? This series is aimed at helping us to be more pre-
pared by spending more time anticipating His arrival.

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.

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." 18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 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.

20 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.” 21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 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. 23 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, 25 “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 ESV)

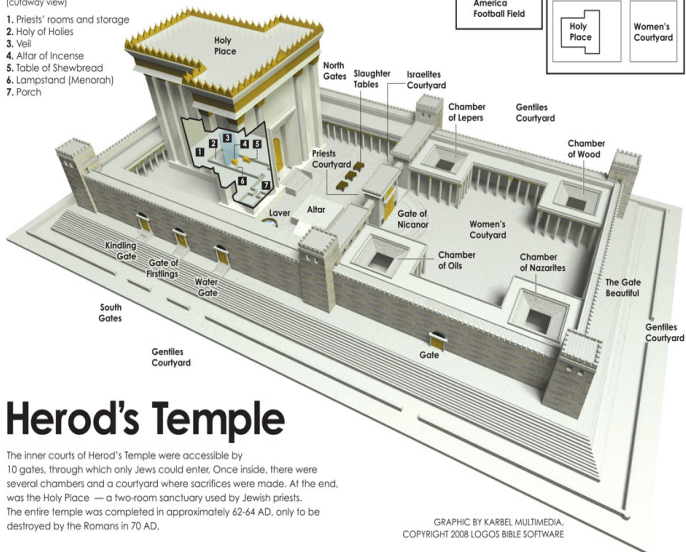
Commentary

We are told by Luke that these events take place in specific time and place; Judea during the reign of King Herod the great who ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC, as a vassal king under the authority of the Roman empire. Herod was not a Jew himself, and thus was despised by the Jewish people. Herod wavered between incredible cruelty and ruthlessness, to astute leadership which got the best deal for his people from the Romans. Herod's cruelty was not only to his own people, he had his wife Mariamme executed, as well as his son Antipater, which prompted Caesar Augustus to say, “he would rather be Herod's pig than his son!”

Herod was renowned for his building projects, and perhaps his greatest building project was the expansion of the Temple in Jerusalem. A well known rabbinic saying went, “whoever has not beheld Herod's building has not seen anything beautiful in his life.

INSIDE THE HOLY PLACE (cutaway view)

1. Priests' rooms and storage
2. Holy of Holies
3. Veil
4. Altar of Incense
5. Table of Shewbread
6. Lampstand (Menorah)
7. Porch



Herod's Temple

The inner courts of Herod's Temple were accessible by 10 gates, through which only Jews could enter. Once inside, there were several chambers and a courtyard where sacrifices were made. At the end was the Holy Place — a two-room sanctuary used by Jewish priests. The entire temple was completed in approximately 62-64 AD, only to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

GRAPHIC BY KARIEL MULTIMEDIA.
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It is in this setting the story of the Angel visiting Zechariah takes place. There were twenty four division of priests, and each division served for a week at a time twice a year in the temple. There were approximately 18,000 priests, so it was a once in a lifetime privilege to be chosen for the task of offering incense on the Altar. We are told Zechariah was chosen by lot, but we should not see this as a matter of luck or random chance, lots were cast in the Old Testament as way of deciding, but the outcome was always attributed to God's sovereign determination.

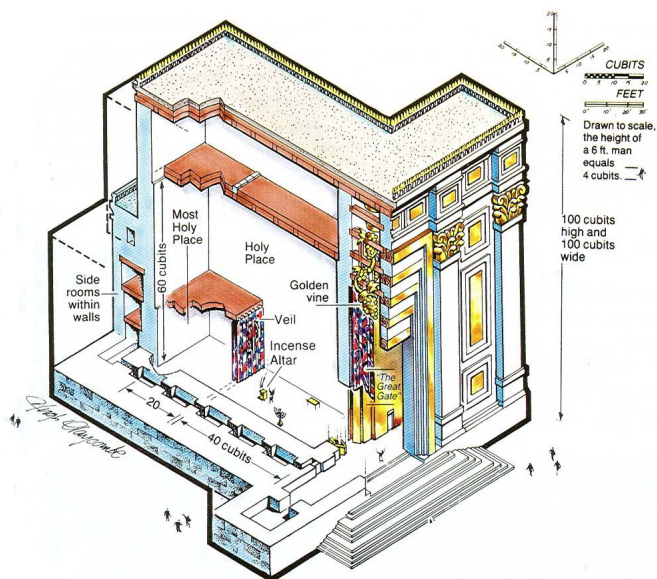
Both Zechariah and Elizabeth come from not just a priestly heritage, but first High Priest's line of heritage - Aaron. As we hear about their wonderful pedigree and own righteousness it comes as a shock that they are left childless, and it should remind us of the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, and Hannah. As we think of those stories we

Can anticipate what God will do here.

Sure enough an angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah as he is burning incense and naturally he is taken aback. The people outside are praying, (for the messiah) and both their prayers and Zechariah's coalesce and God answers both in this birth announcement of John, the forerunner of the messiah, who will get God's people ready to receive Him. The reference to the spirit of Elijah is with regard to John prophetically holding the people accountable and indeed the king (Herod Antipas) over his relationship with his brother's wife. John will also be filled with the Holy Spirit as a precursor of the promise every believer will enjoy after the ascension of Jesus.

The angel's "good news" is met by doubt on the part of Zechariah, to which the angel responds by giving his name - Gabriel, and that he stands in the presence of God, and Zechariah will get his sign; he will be unable to talk until John has been born. While all this has been going inside the temple the worshippers on the outside are wondering what is going on, and when Zechariah eventually appears they realise something is up, and he has had a divine encounter.

At the end of the week Zechariah travels home, and sure enough Elizabeth becomes pregnant, giving thanks to the Lord who has not forgotten her, but brought her out of the "reproach" of childlessness.



Group Study

Start this week's group by reviewing your responses to last week's study, how you applied them during the week, what you discovered as you applied them. What were the successes and difficulties, and where adjustments will you need to make?

Share with the group some of the best celebrations you have had in your life. How did anticipation of the event help make the celebration even more memorable?

What are your hopes at the moment?

Have you expressed them to God, and if so, how often do you tell Him?

How do you anticipate God will respond to your hopes?

Do you have any hopes which you think have passed their due by date?

How does that make you feel?

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-20

compare Hannah's hope to Zechariah and Elizabeth's hope

What are the things which prevent you from seeing the fulfilment of your hope in God?

Read Luke 24:13 -35

Why had these two disciples lost hope?

What were they hoping for?

What reinstated the hope in these two disciples?

When we lose hope, what should we look at?

Wrap up:

What will you do this next week to keep alive and fresh the anticipation of hope we have in Christ?

Personal study

Over the next week read the following passages and reflect on how they increase the anticipation of your hope.

13 But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

14 To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

2 Thessalonians 2:13–17 (ESV)

Reflection

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.

30 Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;

31 but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their
strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:28–31 (ESV)

Reflection

This image shows a full page of a notebook or ledger with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1–5 (ESV)

Reflection

[illegible]

21 But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

22 *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;*

23 *they are new every morning;*
great is your faithfulness.

24 *“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”*

25 *The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.*

26 *It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.*

Lamentations 3:21–26 (ESV)

Reflection

This image shows a full page of blank, light blue lined paper. The paper has horizontal ruling lines spaced evenly across its surface, typical of notebook paper. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

REAP Method of studying Scripture

READ

Find the passages for today's reading in the Bible Reading Plan. Read the passages with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement, direction, and correction (2 Timothy 3:16). Underline the verses that seem important and that God is using to speak to you.

EXAMINE

Spend some time reflecting and writing about what you've read. Write down one or two of the key verses that stuck out to you. Ask yourself these questions and write down your thoughts:

- * What is going on in the passage?
- * Who is writing and whom is he writing to?
- * When was the author writing?
- * What are the circumstances that the author is addressing?
- * Does the writer mention anything that might indicate his purpose or intent?
- * How do you think the author wants his audience to respond?

APPLY

After examining the passage, apply the text to your own life. Ask yourself these questions:

- * What is God's word for me from this passage?
- * How will I live differently and be different today because of what I just read?

*What are the things in my life that need to change in light of this truth?

PRAY

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.