INTRODUCTION

In the first couple of chapters of Luke, everyone knows we learn about the miraculous birth of the Lord Jesus. But some people have forgotten or perhaps never knew there was *another* miraculous birth recorded: the birth of John the Baptist. You may wonder why Luke includes this incident when none of the other three gospel writers even mention it. The answer is found on the last page of the Old Testament. In Malachi 4:5-6 we read, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers;"

Four hundred years before Jesus came, God gave the Old Testament Jews a final promise. He promised that the Messiah would come and He told them that before that happens, He would send Elijah as a forerunner. Then for 400 years God was silent. That's what we call the period between the Old and New Testament—400 years of silence. For all those centuries the Jews were expectantly looking for the Messiah. To this day, when our Jewish friends observe Passover, they still set a place and leave an empty chair for ... who else but Elijah? Because Luke is giving us a well thought out organized story of Jesus. He correctly sees the connection between the birth of John and the coming of the forerunner, Elijah. He is letting us know that after 400 years, God shatters the silence with the birth of John the Baptist. Remember those words from Malachi and see if you read them again in a few minutes.

In Luke 1:5-7 we read, "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years."

Zechariah and Elizabeth are the parents-to-be of John the Baptist. The name Zechariah means "God remembers" and Elizabeth means "God's oath," or "promise." We learn later they lived simple lives out in the hills of Judea. They would have been considered "hillbillies" to the elegant Jerusalem crowd. They were faithful servants of the Lord, both descendants of Aaron. The one cloud that hung over their lives was that they couldn't have children. There are many of you in this church who deal with the same feelings that Zechariah and Elizabeth faced. You would love to have children but perhaps for a variety of reasons, you haven't been able to have children yet. In Bible times there was a strong social stigma that was attached to being childless. Females in this condition were called "barren" and many people interpreted it as some kind of punishment from God. Even that word *barren* was a point of shame for Elizabeth. It is a word conjures images of a dry wind blowing across a lifeless desert.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child for many years but now they had grown older and had probably stopped praying, because they both thought it was impossible. They had forgotten God specialized in the impossible. Note something else about these two: They were old folks, people we would call Forerunners. Maybe you are here today and you think that you've entered spiritual retirement and you've already done enough for God. Or perhaps you think that you have already received the greatest blessings that you'll ever enjoy—think again.

In this passage, we are going to see three steps that Zechariah took that allowed him to see God work in a miraculous way. You've heard of the Texas Two-Step. You've all heard of 12-step programs for recovering addicts. Today we are going to look at the three steps you can take to see God work in your life. We are going to talk about *worship*, *wonder* and *willingness*. Then we are going to see that we can take the same steps that Zechariah took.

STEP I: WORSHIP—THE JOY OF MEETING GOD (8-12)

Luke 1:8-12 "Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear."

In those days, there were thousands of priests, so the priestly duties had been divided up according to their priestly order (See 1 Chronicles 24). When it came time for the order of Abijah's division to perform the temple duties, Zechariah went to Jerusalem. Most priests lived normal lives for most of the year, but for two weeks during the year, they were on "active duty." It's kind of like being in the National Guard today. It was a time the priests anticipated all year long (unlike the National Guard). There could have been hundreds of priests in the order of Abijah, so each day they cast lots to see who would get to perform the special task of burning incense. One day, Zechariah was chosen for this very high privilege of burning the incense, which he would have done either in the morning or the evening. This was such a high privilege it could be done by a priest only once in a lifetime. It was a highly coveted task.

One can only imagine the feelings Zechariah must have experienced the evening before his duty was performed. On the one hand, he must have rejoiced in the high privilege that was his, which he had hoped for all his life. On the other hand, he must have reflected on Leviticus chapter 10, which records the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, for carrying out this ritual in a wrong manner. The Bible says they offered "strange fire" and died as a result. Thus, there were the mixed feelings of rejoicing and fear. He probably carefully rehearsed in his mind exactly how he would perform his duty, so he would emerge from the holy place alive.

While all the other priests remained outside the temple building singing and praying, Zechariah entered the Most Holy Place. While the Temple complex was large, the actual building of the temple itself was rather small and only contained two rooms. Both rooms together were a little over 100 feet long and about 75 feet wide. The first room was the Most Holy Place. This was where the altar of incense was located. The altar was just in front of the tall curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from the room called the "Holy of Holies." Inside the Holy of Holies was the golden box called the Ark of the Covenant and was entered on only one day per year, the Day of Atonement, by the High Priest. So this was as close as Zechariah would ever get to where the Jews believed the Shekinah Glory of God dwelt. You can imagine how much in awe he must have been.

It was Zechariah's job to ignite the incense that day. This was a mixture of spices mixed with material that created a great deal of smoke. It produced a very heavy smoke that had a pungent, sweet smell. The burning of incense symbolized two important things. First, it was to be a picture of the prayers of God's people. Like the smoke of incense, our prayers waft upward into the presence of God. When the incense was lit inside the Most Holy place, the smoke would fill the room and begin to billow out from the openings around the top of the walls on either side of the room. As the other priests were outside praying, they would look for this smoke and it would be a picture of their prayers. The incense was also to veil God's awesome presence. On the Day of Atonement, this heavy smoke would veil the sight of the ark so the priest would not die from seeing God. We are told in the Old Testament that when Moses first built the tabernacle in the wilderness, Aaron made the initial sacrifice. God came and consumed the sacrifice with fire and smoke and from that time, the Jews were reminded of God's presence by the smoke of incense.

Even to this day, Eastern Orthodox Christians still use the burning of incense as part of their worship. For instance, when you visit the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem, the air inside is often thick with the smoke of incense. You can see it, you can certainly smell it, and you can even taste it when you breathe, you can almost feel it on your skin, and you can even hear the fires sputtering inside the censures: in other words, it assaults all your senses. There is a reason for that. When you have a real experience of worship, it transcends all your senses. It is really *not* a sensory experience—it goes beyond that. The incense was to remind the Jews of this truth.

As Zechariah was performing his duty something amazing happened. The angel, Gabriel, appears to bring a message from God. Zechariah reacts the way most people do in the Bible when they see an angel—he is terrified! Zechariah has a divine encounter. He becomes so aware of the power and presence of God that he is in awe. Now you've got to remember, that for 400 years, there had not been a single recorded incident of God sending and angel or delivering a message to Israel in any form. For thousands of days, priests had gone through the same religious motions, but they hadn't had a revelation from God. You can't say that Zech was *expecting* this to happen. This was an unexpected visitation from heaven.

That's a good description of worship. How many times have you approached the experience of worship and simply gone through the motions? Walk in, sit down, stand up, sing a little, sit down again, pass the plate, open the Bible, listen and fill in the blanks, stand up, sing again, and walk out—and you never truly meet God. Worship is the joy of meeting God. You say, "How could that be? I thought God was everywhere. How can you meet Him." Actually, worship is an experience through which you are focused on God and you become more aware of His presence with you. We'll say more about that later. Worship is the first step in seeing God work. Now let's look at the second stage or step in this process.

STEP II: WONDER—THE JOY OF HEARING FROM GOD (13-20)

Luke 1:13-20 "But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the

Holy Spirit even from birth. [I don't know what that means, but I heard one lady say she wouldn't have minded keeping him in the nursery!] Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit of Elijah, [remember the last words of the Old Testament? Here's the connection] to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.' The angel answered, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not be able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Wow! What a message! The first thing Gabriel said was "Do not be afraid." By the way, while I was writing my book on angels I researched the most common messages of angels in the Bible, and the most common thing that angels say is "Do not fear." Obviously, that's because most people are scared out of their wits when they see one! However, I've found that this is one of the most common messages God delivers to people when they worship Him. Maybe you are here today and you are trembling inside because you are afraid that something bad is going to happen. If you listen, God will whisper to you, "Don't be afraid, I'm here. I'll take care of you." Then you can say, like David, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." (Psalm 23:4)

The next message Gabriel delivers is, "Your prayer has been heard." Now you may think Gabriel is talking about Zechariah's prayer for a child, but I don't think so. By Zechariah's response, it's obvious he had given up on the idea. And remember Zechariah was there praying as a priest, on behalf of the nation of Israel. What were they praying for? What had they been praying for hundreds of years? They had been praying for the Messiah to come, for God's Kingdom to come. (The Jews are *still* praying for that today) God was going to answer that prayer *and* answer Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer for a son. Wow! What an awesome God He is. Then Gabriel gives proof that God has finally decided to break His silence by connecting the birth of John with His promise given in Malachi. Gabriel tells Zechariah that his son would be the "Elijah" who would fulfill these final words of the Old Testament to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. God was answering his prayer—the silence was broken.

Today, for some of you, it seems that God has been silent for a long time. When I mention the wonder and the joy of hearing from God, and you listen and think, "I haven't heard from God for a long, long time." You may think God is angry with you.

When I was in Malawi, Africa, and meeting with our missionaries, one of the missionaries told me that you must always speak to people in the villages. If you don't say anything they think you are angry. One African had told him, "In our tribe, if a man is angry, he doesn't speak. That's why we think God is displeased with us. He is so silent."

Are you experiencing the joy of hearing from God? It may be that God is speaking, but you aren't listening. We'll say more about that later. For now, notice Zechariah's response. I think it's pretty funny. He doesn't believe Gabriel, or God. He says, "There are two reasons that can't happen—one is me—and the other one is my old wife." In the original Greek he uses the normal

word for "old" when he refers to himself but when he describes Elizabeth he uses a phrase, which literally says, "Too many years have taken their toll on her." It's almost like he's saying, "I'm old, but the problem is really with my wife." Has Zechariah forgotten the story of Sarah who was old and barren? Then she had Isaac. Had he forgotten about Hannah who was barren, yet gave birth to Samuel? Sometimes we think a miracle is something that only happens to others, not to us.

Gabriel isn't impressed: In fact, he's a little miffed. He says, "You don't believe me? You don't believe God? Unbelief can be damaging to your health, buddy. Okay, just to show you, you aren't going to be able to talk until all of this has been fulfilled." Now I don't know what constitutes the greater miracle, an elderly woman having a baby or a preacher being quiet for nine months!

We've moved from worship to wonder. Now let's follow Zechariah into the third step. Let's stop here for a moment. Zechariah met God in Worship; that was really wonderful. Then he heard from God; that was amazing—but now it's up to Zechariah. Is He going to do anything about what He has heard and experienced? He could have just walked out of the temple, unable to talk, and still doubting God. He could have chosen to do nothing about what the angel told him. Then he would have lived the rest of his life simply known as the priest who was struck dumb by God in the temple. Millions of Christians gather in thousands of churches all across this globe every week. Some don't ever get to the first step. Others worship, but they don't hear God's voice. But I'm convinced there are many who take the first two steps: They meet God, they hear His voice, but then they leave and *never do anything about what they've heard!* How sad.

STEP III: WILLINGNESS—THE JOY OF OBEYING GOD (21-25)

Luke 1:21-25 "Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.'"

Now Zechariah came out of church—a changed man. Everyone knew he had met God, seen a vision. And by the way, folks, when you have truly been with God, other people can usually discern that. I like the verse that says, "When his time of service was completed he went home." In other words, an encounter with God is no reason for you to shirk your basic responsibilities. Then, there is a gap between verse 24 and verse 25. Now, I'm not qualified to get into a discussion of the sexual practices of senior adults, but it's safe to assume that at least Zechariah and Elizabeth no longer thought it was possible for her to become pregnant. But that didn't stop them from trying again! And sure enough, one morning Elizabeth is a little nauseous and after a few weeks, she realizes a miracle has happened. When she is certain, she says to Zechariah, "Guess what sweetheart? I'm pregnant." Do you know what Zechariah says? Nothing, because he can't talk, remember? How many of you wives would like to live with a husband who couldn't say anything for nine months? You say, "My husband doesn't say much more than

'What's for supper?' anyway!" How many of you husbands would like to live with a wife who couldn't ... forget it. It's not gonna happen!

The point I want you to see is very important. After worship, and the wonder of hearing from God, Zechariah demonstrated willingness. He was willing to do his part in God's plan. And sure enough—Elizabeth is pregnant. She is so happy! She praises God for taking away her reproach among the people. For years when Elizabeth walked through her village, women whispered, "There's Elizabeth; she can't have children." Now, as an old woman, she is expecting, what a miracle! I've known couples that have tried and tried for years to get pregnant. They visit doctors and take medicine and then, many times when it seems that think it will never happen, they find themselves expecting a child. If that has happened to any of you, you know what Elizabeth is feeling.

Remember what the names of Zechariah and Elizabeth mean? "God remembers" and "His oath." In the birth of this child, their two names were joining to form a message from God. In John the Baptist, God remembered His Oath—and do you know what the name John means in Hebrew?—*God is gracious*, and He is! He is gracious and remembers His oath from Malachi 4.

Now that's a great story and it will be continued in a couple of weeks when Elizabeth receives a visit from her relative, Mary, who is also pregnant with a miracle child. That's a great story, but what can we learn from it? Well, remember those three steps to seeing God work: *worship, wonder* and *willingness*. Let's conclude this message by considering how we are relating to God in those three areas. I'd like to assist you in conducting what I call a

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL INVENTORY

Take a moment and ask yourself these three questions. First,

1. In private and corporate worship, am I often aware of God's presence?

Notice there are two settings for worship. First, there is private. When you have a daily quiet time, alone with God, are you aware that He is there with you? Then there is this corporate experience of worship in which hundreds of people gather together to focus on God. Are you aware of God's presence here? As much as I need and enjoy this time of corporate worship, I meet God every morning. I take some time to focus on His presence and to read His Word and to worship Him. I sing to Him, I talk to Him. I have some glorious experiences of worship all alone. Do you? God is always there, but when we focus exclusively on Him, He reveals Himself in a way that is different than any other time. Like the song says, "Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble."

Some of you may be watching on television, or sitting in this room saying, "I agree. Worship is a private experience. That's why I don't believe you have to go to a church to worship. I can worship on the lake, at a mountain, or even in my own house." Of course you can. But you can't escape the fact that the Bible commands us to gather together with other believers and worship the Lord together. The Psalmist says, "Oh glorify the Lord with me and Let us exalt His name together." (Psalm 34:3) Hebrews 10:25 says that we are not to miss "gathering together to

encourage one another." If you want to make the most of your corporate worship experience, make sure you have a dynamic personal worship time. If the only time you ever worship is when you are in a church gathering, your worship experience will be rather shallow. There's a verse I often use when I think of personal and corporate worship. It's James 4:8, "Come near to God and He will come near to you, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

When I am in this room and we are singing to God, I try to forget anyone else is here except Jesus. I try to visualize myself drawing near to God. In order to do that, I must ask Him to cleanse me, purify my heart. Look at the words "double-minded." What does they mean? It's the reason some of you may attend a worship service, but never truly worship. It's because you aren't single-minded in your pursuit of meeting God. You have too much on your mind. You are thinking about the wrong things: the music is too loud, you don't like your seat, you are thinking about all you've got to do this afternoon and next week. Your heart isn't pure in its desire to meet God. Worship involves clearing your mind of everything else except this glorious thought: God is here. I have to come to worship and adore him. I love you Lord. That's single-minded worship.

2. Am I able to discern God's voice speaking to me?

That was the second step in Zechariah's experience. There are many voices yelling at you sometimes it's hard to know which voice is God's. Life is like walking through the Midway at the East Texas State Fair. Like most years, Cindy and I visit the fair and look at the livestock and then eat a lot of really unhealthy food—and stop every 10 feet to greet church members. We always walk through the area where the "games" are located. All these guys called "barkers" (I guess that's why they *look* the way they do) are yelling at me, "Hey, win the little lady a prize, come on try your luck ... " You know the spiel. One year when Laura Grace was much younger, she got separated from her friends in that area and she got a little lost. In the midst of all the noise and yelling and music I heard a voice that said, "Daddy!" Instantly I turned around and saw Laura Grace ... you could say my mind was "tuned in" to the sound of that one voice.

In your life you are going to be bombarded with thousands of messages, from people, from television, from the radio. How can you learn to discern God's voice? Can you even do that? In Isaiah 30:21, God says, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'"

You may be wondering *how* you can distinguish God's voice from all the other voices. Many of you have taken Henry Blackaby's study, *Experiencing God*. I've taught it to hundreds of men, and one of the best parts of that study is where he teaches us that we can hear God's voice in four ways. Let me ask you. Are you able to hear God's voice:

a. In His Word—the Bible?

That's the main way God speaks to us. When you read it, when I teach it, when you meditate on it, are you able to hear God's voice speaking to you? If the answer is "no," then it may be that you aren't listening. He *is* speaking, are you tuned in when you read and study the Word? Next, can you hear God's voice:

b. In prayer dialogue?

Notice I said "dialogue" because for many people, prayer is a monologue. You talk to God, but you don't take time to listen. Some people don't really pray. They "say prayers." That is, they may repeat some words they have memorized, and it's like reciting a poem to themselves. They recite the words, but they don't really talk to God. Prayer is to be a conversation. Take the time to listen for God's "still, small voice" when you pray. Next, can you hear God's voice:

c. In understanding circumstances?

If you aren't up on the first two ways, chances are you won't be able to understand what God is doing in the circumstances of your life. Someone has said that God's hand is in the glove of human circumstances. God is usually trying to tell us something through what happens around us, but we must be seeking to interpret every event in the light of His Word. Finally, have you ever heard God's voice:

d. Through godly advice from God's people?

Jesus has a body today: it's called the church. Sometimes when you seek counsel from godly people, God will speak to you through them. By the way, I don't believe in "unsolicited advice." In other words, sometimes a person will say, "God told me to tell you something ... " That's pretty scary. But when you humbly approach someone whose wisdom you respect and ask them for advice, God can use them to help you determine His will in a matter. Remember our three steps? Worship that does not lead to the wonder of hearing from God is incomplete worship. But the third step is still left: Willingness. Question three is:

3. Am I willing to obey God—even if it seems impossible?

By the way, God knows whether or not you are willing. He didn't force Zechariah to obey Him, but I believe God knew Zechariah had a willing heart. How? Because Zechariah was a faithful man. If you are faithful in the small things that bring small blessings, God will entrust you with the big things that bring blessings.

In Luke 6:46 Jesus says, "Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say?" Then Jesus describes the life of a person who hears His Word but doesn't obey Him. I used to think this described a person who was totally alienated from God, a person who hadn't even approached God, and certainly not heard from God. Actually this verse describes a person who has taken the first two steps of our message today. They have met God (Jesus) and they have heard His Word. They just weren't willing to obey. Jesus describes their life in Luke 6:49 "But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."

It seemed totally impossible for Elizabeth to get pregnant, yet she and Zechariah obeyed God and then trusted God. There is a great principle of obedience that is woven into the fabric of God's Word and it is this: When you choose to obey God, then He gives you the power to obey Him.

What has God asked you to do that seems impossible? What about love someone who is unlovely to you? What about forgive someone who has hurt you deeply? What about give 10% of your income to Him? What about sharing your faith with your lost friends? When God sees in you a willing heart, then He provides the supernatural power to accomplish what He tells you to do. I like what I heard an old preacher say many years ago. He was talking about obedience and he said, "If God tells me to jump through that brick wall, my job is to jump at it and His job is to get me through it."

CONCLUSION

I've had many encounters with God like Zechariah had. Can I tell you about something that really changed my life? I shared part of it when our deacon body met earlier this week. Thirty years ago, in the summer of 1970, I was working as a lifeguard at a summer camp. It was a Baptist camp, but I was there so I could spend a summer away from home, meeting girls and working on my tan. I was approaching my senior year in high school and was planning on going to college and then to law school. Everything was going according to my plans.

On the evening of June 24, 1970, thirty years ago last night, I was in a youth worship service in the auditorium at this camp. I usually didn't pay much attention, but for some reason that night I sang the songs because they were new and upbeat. "In the stars His handy work I see …" A young pastor, whose name I don't even recall began to preach and I started listening. That was pretty unusual for me to really listen to a sermon. After all I had heard sermons since I was a child. In the middle of his message, he seemed to look right at me and he said these words, "God called me to preach when I was 17 years old, and I've been doing it ever since." In the next moment I heard a voice say to me in a crystal clear way, "David, that's what I want you to do." You may ask, "Was it an audible voice?" No, it was much louder than that. All I can tell you is that I met God that night—step one—and He spoke to me—step two.

I didn't go forward during the invitation. In fact, I did something that I really don't like people to do today. I walked out the back door during the invitation. But I didn't leave to beat anyone to the parking lot or to Luby's. I had an overwhelming desire to get alone with God. I climbed a little hill that overlooked that camp and got on my knees looking up into the starlit sky. I wanted to say, "God, you are making a mistake. I don't really like preachers; they seem too holy. I don't really like to study. I am terrified with the thought of standing up in front of any size group and speaking." That's what I wanted to say. But instead, I found myself weeping saying, "God, if you are sure you know what you are doing, all I can say is that *I am willing*." Step three.

The very next week I had a chance to preach when a group of camp workers went to a local church to lead the Sunday services. It was supposed to be a testimony but it became a sermon. All I can say is "God called me to preach when I was 17 years old and that's all I've been doing since then." What is God saying to you today? Are you listening?

OUTLINE

STEP I: WORSHIP—THE JOY OF MEETING GOD (8-12)

STEP II: WONDER—THE JOY OF HEARING FROM GOD (13-20)

STEP III: <u>WILLINGNESS</u>—THE JOY OF <u>OBEYING</u> GOD (21-25)

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL INVENTORY

1. In private and corporate worship, am I often aware of God's presence?

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. *James 4:8*

2. Am I able to discern God's voice speaking to me?

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, "This is the way; walk in it." *Isaiah 30:21*

- a. In His Word—the Bible?
- b. In prayer dialogue?
- c. In understanding circumstances?
- d. Through godly advice from God's people?

3. Am I willing to obey God-even if it seems impossible?

"But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete." *Luke 6:49*



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For the Joy... Pastor David Dykes