

December 18

Lesson 3

# THE FORERUNNER

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## OF THE SAVIOR

DEVOTIONAL READING: John 1:19-23

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:1-25, 57-80

### LUKE 1:8-20

<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup> 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 call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>



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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 before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, "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. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

### KEY VERSES

*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 call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth."*—**Luke 1:13, 14**

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the circumstances of John the Baptist's miraculous conception.
2. Identify points where the angel's pronouncement draws on Old Testament themes to depict John's future ministry.
3. Identify times when his or her faith is more like that of Zechariah than that of Mary, and make a plan for change.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. When We Least Expect It
- B. Lesson Background

### I. Unsuspecting Priest (Luke 1:8-10)

- A. Special Honor (vv. 8, 9)

*Lots of Luck?*

- B. Typical Crowd (v. 10)

### II. Unexpected Announcement (Luke 1:11-17)

- A. Startling Appearance (vv. 11, 12)
- B. Incredible Promise (vv. 13, 14)
- C. Unique Ministry (vv. 15-17)

### III. Unwanted Proof (Luke 1:18-20)

- A. Skeptical Question (v. 18)
- B. Indignant Response (vv. 19, 20)

*On Being Speechless*

### Conclusion

- A. Too Good to Be True?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. When We Least Expect It

Once when I had just quit a bad job, I was driving through my neighborhood thinking that a particular type of work would be ideal for me. Almost at that moment, I looked up and saw a "help wanted" sign in the window of a local business for that very type of job. I applied and was hired the next day.

During my college years, my wife and I prayed that God would lead us to friends who would share and affirm our faith. Within a week, we had met another Christian couple who have remained dear friends for 25 years.

Perhaps most dramatically, and related to today's Scripture passage, my wife became pregnant only two weeks after we had resigned ourselves to never having a second child. That was after several years of infertility following a miscarriage and having received no clear medical explanation after numerous tests. God is known for coming through when we most need it!

### B. Lesson Background

Luke 1 provides the only detailed account of John the Baptist's origins, revealing the miraculous circumstances of his birth. In certain respects, the story of Jesus' life and the founding of the church begins with John the Baptist (who is not to be confused with the apostle John). John the Baptist was predicted to be "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3; compare Luke 3:4-6). John was to be the messenger to prepare that way (Malachi 3:1; compare Luke 7:27); and John was to be an Elijah in correcting wayward hearts (Malachi 4:5, 6; compare Luke 1:17, in today's text).

The comparison with the prophet Elijah is telling. Elijah's ministry was one of dramatic confrontation (see 1 Kings 17:1-21:29; 2 Kings 1:3-17; 2 Chronicles 21:12-15), much of it occurring during the reign of King Ahab (about 874-853 BC). He was the infamous monarch who married a pagan and promoted idolatry among the northern tribes of Israel (1 Kings 16:29-33).

The circumstances of Elijah's departure from this life were well known in the first century AD: as his disciple Elisha watched, "suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind" ([2 Kings 2:11](#)).

Some years later, a (speculative) conclusion was reached that Elijah had not in fact died. Instead, he was alive with God in Heaven, waiting for a command to return to earth and resume his preaching of repentance. As [Malachi 4:5](#) reveals, Elijah's return is associated with the coming of a great day of judgment.

After introductory remarks, Luke begins his Gospel by sketching the time frame of his first narrative: it was "in the time of Herod king of Judea," who reigned 37-4 BC ([Luke 1:5](#)). The focus then shifts immediately to the situation of a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Three further facts set the stage: (1) both were righteous, (2) the couple was childless, and (3) no child was expected because of advanced age ([1:6, 7](#)).

## I. Unsuspecting Priest

([LUKE 1:8-10](#))

### A. Special Honor ([vv. 8, 9](#))

#### 8. **Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,**

The temple in Jerusalem is where a priest carries out the duties of *servicing ... before God*. The temple itself is managed by powerful aristocratic families. Although these individuals are wealthy, most priests live as peasants in the villages and countryside of Judea (compare [Luke 1:39, 40](#)). There they support themselves by their own work and perhaps by occasional gifts from neighbors.

## HOW TO SAY IT

Ahab	<i>Ay-hab.</i>
Elijah	<i>Ee-lye-juh.</i>
Gabriel	<i>Gay-bree-uhl.</i>
Herod	<i>Hair-ud.</i>
Judea	<i>Joo-dee-uh.</i>
Nazirite	<i>Naz-uh-rite.</i>
Zechariah	<i>Zack-uh-rye-uh.</i>

Following precedent established under King David, each priest is assigned to 1 of 24 divisions according to family lineage ([1 Chronicles 24:1-4](#)). Each division is tasked with staffing operations in the temple for two weeks every year according to a specific order ([24:3, 19](#)). The order had been established by casting lots to keep things impartial ([24:5-18](#); compare [24:31](#); [25:8](#); [26:12-16](#)).

#### 9. **he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.**

Assignment of duties inside *the temple of the Lord* are determined by casting lots among the priests within the division on duty. This custom allows God to select the appropriate person for the occasion (see [Proverbs 16:33](#)).

With so many priests desiring to *burn incense*—a high honor—none is allowed to do so more than once in a lifetime. For Zechariah, then, the opportunity to serve in this manner has not come before nor will it come again. Incense is offered at the temple of the Lord twice daily ([Exodus 30:7, 8](#)).

### *LOTS OF LUCK?*

Some years ago, I was reading about missions to the American Indians. The account was that of a denomination in eastern Pennsylvania deciding in about 1800 to send two men as missionaries to frontier Indiana. The group also decided that at least one of the men should be married. One man agreed. Then the group asked the young women of the community for a volunteer to marry the man. Of several volunteers, one was chosen by lot. This was not the method I used to select a wife, but apparently it worked for them!

Choosing by lot was a common form of selection in the ancient world and remains so today in certain situations. The leaders of ancient Athens were chosen by lot from among the citizens. Modern jury pools are chosen at random from among registered voters. References to assigning "by lot" the various portions of Canaan to the tribes of Israel are numerous in the Old Testament.

When we use [Proverbs 16:33](#) as a lens through which to view the seemingly random selection of Zechariah for incense-burning duty, the choice doesn't seem so random: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The discussion question that comes next seems therefore to be an obvious one to ask!—J. B. N.

| *What Do You Think?* |

Under what circumstances, if any, should church decisions today be made by lot? Why?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering positive scriptural depictions ([Proverbs 18:18](#); [Acts 1:26](#); etc.)

Considering negative scriptural depictions ([Esther 3:5-7](#); [Mark 15:24](#); etc.)

Considering appearances to outsiders and those of different levels of spiritual maturity

## B. Typical Crowd (v. 10)

**10. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.**

All the assembled worshipers wait prayerfully in the outer courts as Zechariah goes about the duties assigned to him. *The time for the burning of incense* probably is “at three in the afternoon” ([Acts 3:1](#)). At this time the priest is near the altar of incense (next verse) to perform his tasks there.

While his duties are profoundly significant for Zechariah personally, the day probably seems quite ordinary to everyone else. Luke does not indicate the setting to be that of a major feast such as Passover. Therefore it is likely that the gathered crowd consists largely of local residents who come to pray because it is their normal practice to do so. On this occasion, however, God interrupts that routine in a remarkable way.

## II. Unexpected Announcement

([LUKE 1:11-17](#))

### A. Startling Appearance (vv. 11, 12)

**11. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.**

Zechariah is interrupted—by *an angel of the Lord*, no less! Such a designation occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament (always fronted with the definite article *the* instead of the indefinite *an* in the *NIV*). Sometimes this phrase seems to refer to God himself (example: [Genesis 16:7-13](#); [22:15-18](#)). But Luke uses the designation here to refer to a divine envoy, as [Luke 1:19](#) (below) makes clear. The transliterated Greek word *angel* is that language’s ordinary word for “messenger,” and it is translated that way in [Luke 7:24, 27](#); [9:52](#).

The choice the translators made in this regard is seen in the Old Testament as well. Particularly interesting is [2 Kings 1:3](#), where two occurrences of a certain Hebrew word are translated first “angel” then “messengers” in the same sentence.

The structure, use, and placement of *the altar of incense* are described in [Exodus 30:1-10](#); [37:25-28](#); and [40:26, 27](#).

**12. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.**

While we do not know what angels look like, Zechariah’s response of *fear* is consistent with that of others who encounter them (examples: [Judges 13:20-22](#); [Matthew 28:5](#); [Acts 10:1-4](#)).

### B. Incredible Promise (vv. 13, 14)

**13. 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 call him John.”**

As noted in the Lesson Background, *Zechariah* and *wife Elizabeth* have been unable to have children, and now she is past menopause. Infertility is a particular source of grief at the time: aside from the emotional pain of being childless, parents normally are supported in old age by their adult children (compare [Mark 7:9-13](#)).

From a cultural perspective, the fact that “children are a heritage from the Lord” ([Psalm 127:3](#)) implies God’s blessing; on the flip side, however, childlessness may indicate unrighteousness (see [Leviticus 20:20, 21](#); [Jeremiah 22:30](#)). Childbearing is seen by Jews as fulfilling the command to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and increase in number” ([Genesis 1:28](#)) as continued through Abraham ([15:5](#); [17:5, 6](#)).

Zechariah and Elizabeth must have prayed over this issue many times. But with the passing of years, they eventually must have concluded that their prayer will go unanswered.

#### What Do You Think?

How can the prayer experience of Zechariah influence your own prayer life?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

Concerning what you do while waiting on God

Dealing biblically with the tension between being satisfied with what you have and the disappointment with what you lack

Other

But the absence of a *yes* answer does not mean that God has not heard a person's prayer! In the case at hand, God's answer has not been *no*, but *wait* (compare [Daniel 10:12-14](#)). The angel's promise implies that the forthcoming birth will result from a miraculous conception (compare [Genesis 17:15-17](#); [18:10-12](#)). The child's name further speaks to divine purpose: the word translated *John* combines the name of God with a Hebrew verb that means "to be gracious."

*What Do You Think?*

How would you counsel expectant parents who ask your advice on naming their child?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Positive name-associations to consider
- Negative name-associations to consider
- Regarding expectations of extended family

**14. "He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,**

What we see predicted in the verse before us indeed comes to pass nine months later, per [Luke 1:57-66](#). Even so, the angel likely refers more broadly to the effect of John's life and ministry. That life will cause *many* to *rejoice* at what John's having come on the scene signifies: the imminent arrival of the Savior (compare [Luke 3:1-18](#)).

### C. Unique Ministry (vv. 15-17)

**15. "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 before he is born.**

The angel's description is reminiscent of conditions for taking a Nazirite vow, the whole of which is set forth in [Numbers 6:1-21](#). Verse 3 in particular addresses one's decision *never to take wine or other fermented drink* (see also [Judges 13:2-7, 14](#); compare with priests in [Leviticus 10:8-11](#); [Ezekiel 44:21](#)). Those taking the Nazirite vow temporarily do so for a time of spiritual reflection as they dedicate themselves "to the Lord" ([Numbers 6:2](#)).

*What Do You Think?*

What can your church do to help expectant parents prepare to rear their children?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- In study of scriptural precepts
- In evaluating secular sources of parenting wisdom
- In evaluating parental role models
- Other

Later descriptions of John the Baptist seem to indicate that his life is one of permanent self-denial ([Mark 1:6](#); compare [2 Kings 1:8](#)). Such a lifestyle will help ensure his purity, which is vital for one *filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born*. This, in turn, alludes to John's prophetic giftedness. John's greatness in the Lord's sight emphasizes the significance of his work as the Messiah's forerunner (compare [Luke 7:28](#)).

**16. "He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.**

The angel describes John's forthcoming ministry in terms of its scope and effect. Regarding the former, the phrase "my people Israel" occurs hundreds of times in the Old Testament to refer to God's covenant people of that era (example: [1 Kings 6:13](#)). They will be John's intended audience, and he will preach to them "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" ([Luke 3:3](#)) in preparation for the mightier one to come ([3:16](#)).

While John apparently will not be empowered to perform miracles (see [John 10:41](#)), the four Gospels stress the widespread impact of his preaching. *Many* people will travel to hear his message and receive baptism ([Mark 1:5](#)), and a band of disciples eventually gathers around him ([Luke 7:18](#); etc.). Most revealing about John's popularity will be the nature of those who are hostile toward, or at least suspicious about, John and his message ([John 1:19-25](#)). That boldness ultimately results in his demise ([Mark 6:14-29](#)).

**17. "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."**

The angel closes his pronouncement by quoting from the last two verses of the Old Testament, namely [Malachi 4:5, 6](#). This should be a clear signal to Zechariah, a priest knowledgeable in the Scriptures, that his yet-to-be-born son is the one *to make ready a people prepared for the Lord*.

It is important to stress that the angel is referring to John the Baptist's ministry, not his identity. This is seen in the phrase *in the spirit and power of Elijah*. John the Baptist will not be the historical Elijah who has returned, as John himself will confirm ([John 1:21](#)). Immediately after that statement, he will describe himself as "the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" ([John 1:23](#); quoting [Isaiah 40:3](#); see the Lesson Background).

Jesus, also alluding to [Malachi 4:5](#), eventually will compare John the Baptist with Elijah in order to correct a misconception. Certain elements of the religious establishment of the day hold to a literalistic view that the actual, historic Elijah "must come first" ([Matthew 17:10](#)). Jesus' response makes clear that the reference is to John the Baptist ([17:11-13](#)), who ends up being what we might refer to as "a type of Elijah."

### III. Unwanted Proof

([LUKE 1:18-20](#))

#### A. Skeptical Question (v. 18)

**18. Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."**

Surprise turns to skepticism as Zechariah listens to the angel. He and his wife have been unable to have children because "Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old" ([Luke 1:7](#)). Aside from the fact that the Jews have been waiting 400 years for the appearance of another prophet, what the angel describes is physically impossible. With the query *How can I be sure of this?* Zechariah is therefore requesting a sign that will validate the angel's words (compare [Judges 6:37](#)).

#### B. Indignant Response (vv. 19, 20)

**19. The angel said to him, "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."**

Now we know the identity of the angel: he is *Gabriel*, the one who will appear to Mary as well ([Luke 1:26](#); compare [Daniel 8:16](#); [9:21](#)). His response suggests that Zechariah should not be skeptical of the prophecy, given that priest's presumed Scripture knowledge of children being miraculously conceived in circumstances including old age (example: [Genesis 17:15-17](#); [21:1-7](#)). Gabriel's tone is stern. To be skeptical of a divine message of *good news* delivered by one who stands *in the presence of God* is an outrage!

Behind the indignant response, however, perhaps we see God's patience being illustrated in that Gabriel does not simply withdraw his offer immediately. God certainly can find another couple to bring John the Baptist into the world. But God graciously sticks with Zechariah and even grants the man's request for a sign. It's just not the one Zechariah himself would choose! See the next verse.

**20. "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."**

The request of Zechariah for a sign is born of skepticism. The divine reaction to that skeptical request supports the old caution, "Be careful what you ask for; you may just get it!"

Being *not able to speak* throughout the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy ([Luke 1:21, 22, 57-64](#)) is quite appropriate when we realize the lack of faith that *you did not believe my words* implies. The angel's promise concerns the birth of one who will proclaim God's message to Israel; since Zechariah's doubt about a promised son includes doubt of that son's being God's spokesman, then Zechariah himself is now rendered unable to speak *until the day this happens*. This means that Zechariah will be unable to voice what occurred in the temple, the nature of his wife's pregnancy, etc. The elderly priest is therefore being punished with a kind of time-out, and he will have nine months to reflect on his lack of faith.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some ways to make the most of a time of temporary disability?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Considering our own culpability (if any) in causing the problem
- Considering impact on church ministries
- Considering impact on family members

### ON BEING SPEECHLESS

Various creatures have a rudimentary ability to communicate with one another. By a series of chirps, mother birds can alert their young ones to danger, food, etc. Scientists study the noises emitted by sea creatures to determine what level of communication passes between them. But no such communication approaches the level of complexity and usefulness enjoyed by humans.

The ability to speak is one of the greatest gifts God has given us. We can talk about physical things as well as abstract ideas. We can describe

the varied colors of a sunset. We can talk about deep doctrinal subjects. We can speak at a level for children to understand. Amazing!

Those who temporarily lose the ability to speak due to laryngitis gain an inkling of the frustration Zechariah must have felt at not being able to talk about what he had seen and heard. What can be even worse, however, is when someone asks you a question and you have the ability to speak, but you have nothing to say. [Matthew 22:12](#) is the ultimate warning in that regard.—J. B. N.

## Conclusion

### A. Too Good to Be True?

We've all been told to be wary of deals that "seem too good to be true." Even so, scams continue to take in many people, and there are now websites dedicated to exposing the cons. Such sites may include testimonies from those who fell victim to opportunities that seemed too good to be true—and were. If you receive an offer of an unexpected tax return, don't share your bank account number! If a "businessman" from central Africa wants to transfer money to your account before it's seized by the corrupt, collapsing government of his nation, don't reply!

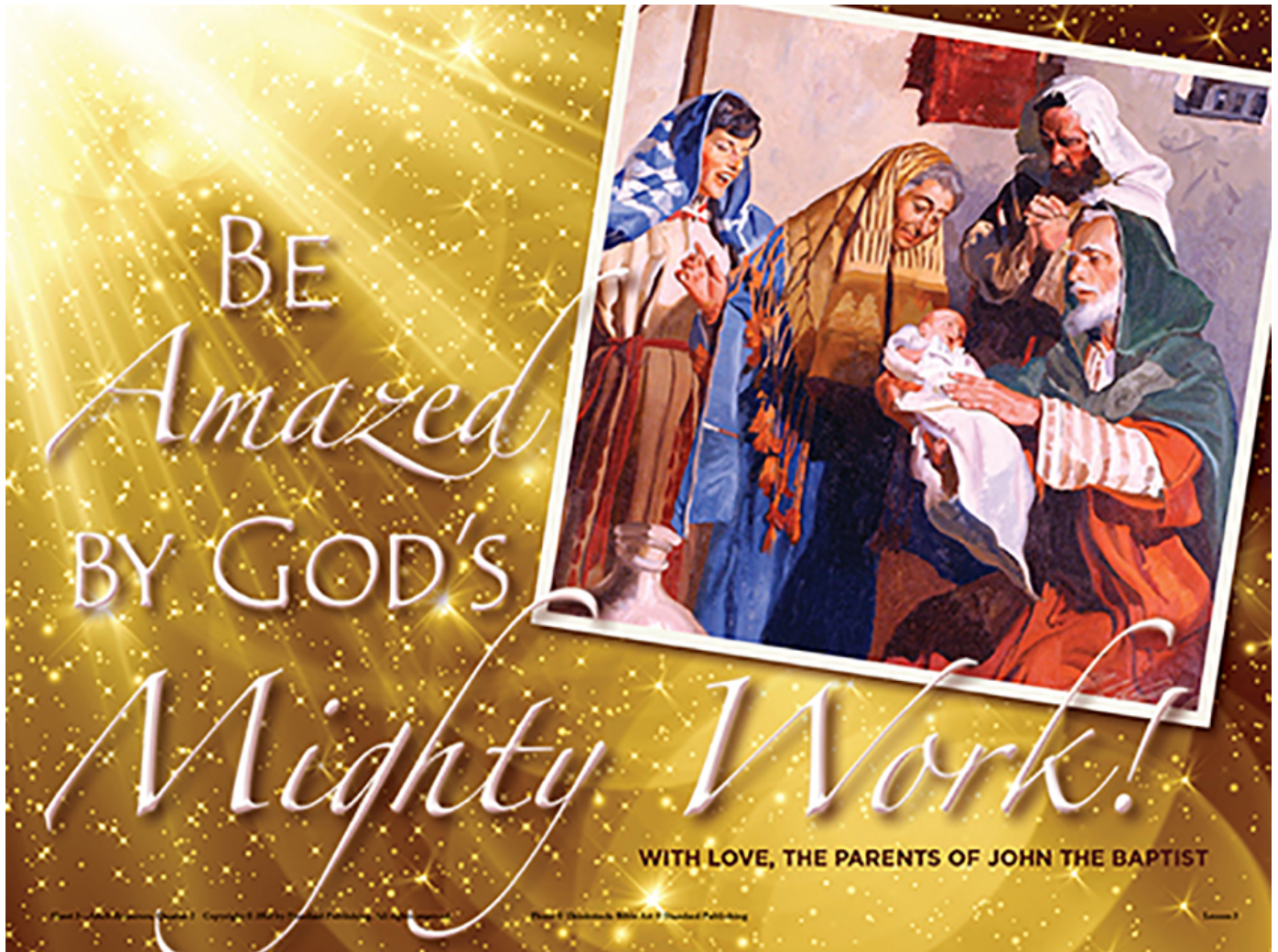
*Is it too good to be true?* is an important question to ask when evaluating promises from other people. But real-life experiences along this line can make us hesitate to believe and act on God's promises. When we reflect on the hardships of life in general, on our own unmet needs in particular, and on seeming failures of prayer in the past, we may become as skeptical as Zechariah. If that begins to happen, we should quickly read the rest of the account of Zechariah and his family. That account is one more proof that God always keeps his promises.

### B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for being patient in our times of doubt! Grant that our doubt be replaced by faith as we wait for your plan to unfold on your schedule. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

God's timing is always perfect.



Visual for Lesson 3. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “What causes us to lose our sense of amazement at God’s mighty works?”

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

### Into the Lesson

Write the following words and phrases on the board:

<i>understudy</i>	<i>second fiddle</i>
<i>sidekick</i>	<i>assistant</i>
<i>helper</i>	<i>subordinate</i>
<i>junior partner</i>	<i>second banana</i>
<i>aide</i>	<i>staffer</i>
<i>supporter</i>	<i>deputy</i>

Lead a discussion about these words, asking how they are similar. Chose one or two from the list and give another word or phrase that it seems to imply. (Example: an understudy would imply a lead actor or actress, a deputy would imply there is a sheriff.) Why is each of these roles important?

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Supporting Roles” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow students to



work individually or in small groups to pair famous associates with their more prominent partners.

Lead into the Bible study by saying, “While being a sidekick or helper is a secondary role, it is a very important one! Without a secondary, the one in the primary position lacks valuable support. Today we will discuss one of the most important supporting roles in history—the forerunner to the Savior, John the Baptist.”

## Into the Word

Prepare ahead three copies of the commentary for this lesson and one copy each of the research assignments below. Divide the class into three groups and allow 10-15 minutes to complete the activity.

*Group 1—Another Day at the Temple (vv. 8-10)*

1. How was Zacharias chosen for his task that day?
2. Explain the significance of incense.
3. Why was Zacharias supposed to be alone in the temple?

*Group 2—An Unexpected Announcement (vv. 11-17)*

1. How was Zacharias’s reaction to an angel a typical one?
2. What phrases in the angel’s message indicate John’s role as a prophet?
3. Why might it be significant that Gabriel’s message quotes [Malachi 4:5, 6](#)?

*Group 3—A Sign of the Promise (vv. 18-20)*

1. Why might you think Zacharias’s response to Gabriel’s news to be justified?
2. Why might you think Zacharias’s response to Gabriel’s news to be unjustified?
3. Why was the sign given to him appropriate?

Allow groups to share their research. Comment as necessary to ensure that all questions are answered completely.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Forerunner Foretold” activity from the reproducible page. Allow students to work individually or in small groups. Students will see how Gabriel’s description of John came to fulfillment later.

## Into Life

Before class, write the names of teens or young adults from your congregation on index cards (one name per card).

Close this lesson by saying, “John the Baptist would go on and prepare the way for Jesus. Have we ever considered ourselves to be forerunners? Who will come after us, and how can we prepare the world for that person?”

“On these cards, I have written the names of younger individuals in this congregation—people who may well be members of this congregation long after we leave this life.

“Take one card if you will promise to pray for the person whose name is on it. Pray that he or she will prepare for a role in Christ’s church, and pray for those who will serve with that person in the future.”