

Hugo Bouter

Offering incense in the temple

"So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord."

Luke 1:8-9

Worship then and now

There were many priests under the old covenant, but there was only one temple in Jerusalem, and the activities of the priests were divided by lot. Luke 1 speaks of the temple house itself, the actual sanctuary (Gr. naos), Luke 2 speaks of the temple in a general sense, that is, the entire temple complex with its buildings and colonnades. In the temple house only the priests were allowed to enter to perform their service there, in the temple complex also others had access like Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary and the Child Jesus.

Offering incense on the altar of incense in the sanctuary was considered a great privilege. According to one Jewish tradition, a priest could approach God in the temple with the holy incense only once during his entire life. Since Zacharias had already reached old age, it was therefore a unique opportunity for him when he was appointed by lot to offer incense. It was the most important moment of his life, and God would use it to speak to him. Unfortunately, he reacted rather unbelievably to the glad tidings he heard in the temple; therefore, he remained mute until the time of the fulfillment of the angel Gabriel's prophecy.

From 1 Chronicles 24 we know that the priests were divided into twenty-four sections. It is true that only four divisions had returned from the Babylonian

captivity (Ezra 2:36-39), but these were again divided into twenty-four service groups and they had the original names. Each division served for a week twice a year, so that there was a weekly change of priests (cf. Luke 1:23).

The priest Zacharias (his name means, "Yahweh remembers") belonged to the division of Abijah. That means, "my Father is Yahweh". That group was the eighth priestly class (1 Chron. 24:10; Luke 1:5). The number eight in Scripture often relates to a new beginning, a new order of things – just as the number seven is the number of fullness, a complete period. God made a wholly new beginning with His people through the sending of the Son in the fullness of the time and through the sending of the forerunner, John the Baptist, whose birth was communicated to Zecharias in a vision in the temple by the angel Gabriel. His name means, "my strength is God". God intervened in a unique way, showing both His goodness toward Israel and His wonderful faithfulness. John means, "Yahweh is merciful", and the name of his mother Elisabeth means, "God is my oath".

As Christians we have the great privilege of approaching God as priests, as worshippers, on a completely new basis: that of the finished work of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We may cry "Abba, Father" and worship our God in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:4-6; Heb. 10:19-22; 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). So our situation is totally different from that of the priests under the old covenant, for whom it was a rarity when they could approach God in the sanctuary. Zecharias is a clear illustration of this.

As Christians, we may continually come to God with the incense of our prayers and our worship and offer it to Him. Already in the Old Testament, the deep spiritual meaning of the incense was indicated by the words, "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Ps. 141:2).

Moreover, in the New Testament the hour of burning incense, namely the evening sacrifice, is called "the hour of prayer" (Luke 1:10; Acts 3:1). Just as the fragrant incense went up before God, so our prayers ascend to God. And we know that through Christ – for He is the true "altar of incense" – they are pleasing to God (cf. Rev. 8:3-4). But again: the limitation of place and time as it applied to the priest Zacharias does not apply to Christians. God's children have free access to the Father (Eph. 2:18; 3:12). We may approach continually and with boldness. Do we appreciate that Christ has made us priests before His God and Father? Do we take advantage of the opportunity to serve God and enter "the house of God" by the Spirit of God?

John the Baptist and his parents

Let us now pay attention to a few details in this history. Zacharias and Elizabeth had a good testimony in their environment: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6). In fact, this is also a practical condition for entering the sanctuary and meeting God in His house. Without sanctification, no one can see the Lord (cf. Matt. 5:8; Heb. 12:14). This is also the way to a fruitful life.

This couple knew the problem of childlessness (Luke 1:7). But for God nothing is too miraculous, as several examples in the Old Testament also show: Sarah (Gen. 18), Manoah's wife (Judg. 13), Hannah (1 Sam. 1). God gives life from death, and this is also true in a figurative sense. A life before God is a fruitful life through the wonderful activity of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6; Gal. 5).

We also learn something here about prayer being answered. The angel said to Zecharias, '(...) for your prayer is heard' (Luke 1:13). In the life of Hezekiah we read similar words: 'I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears' (2 Kings 20:5). It can sometimes take decades for us to get answers to some prayers. But this couple persevered through the years and God answered in His time.

The angel Gabriel spoke at some length about John's birth, his task as a Nazarene, his work in the midst of the people of Israel, and the results. As a prophet, he would go before God in the spirit and power of Elijah, to bring about a return to God and His Word, "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). Unfortunately, the word of the angel did not fall into good soil. It was apparently not accompanied by faith on the part of Zacharias, who was therefore temporarily struck dumb until the day of the fulfillment of this divine revelation (Luke 1:57f.). God is faithful to His promises.
