

One Of God's Most...

Unusual Methods Of Speaking To Us

“Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by Lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. And when the time for the burning of the 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 terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.” (Luke 1:8-13).

The Jewish Priest was a minister of God who worked at the temple managing its upkeep, teaching the people the Scriptures, and directing the worship services. At this time there were about twenty thousand priests throughout the country—far too many to minister in the temple at one time. Therefore the priests were divided into twenty-four separate groups of about 1,000 each, according to David’s instructions in 1 Chronicles 24:3-19. Zechariah was a member of the order of Abijah. Each division served in the Jerusalem temple twice each year for one week.

Zechariah’s division of priests was serving in the temple during this particular week (see Luke 1:5). Each morning, one of the priests would enter the Holy Place in the temple (the sanctuary) to *offer 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. It was not by chance that Zechariah was on duty and that he was chosen that day to enter the Holy Place. God was guiding the events of history to prepare the way for Jesus to come to earth.

The other priests and people would wait outside for the chosen priest to offer the incense and pray on behalf of the nation. When the people would see the smoke from the burning incense, they would pray. The smoke drifting heavenward symbolized their prayers ascending to God’s throne. These *assembled worshipers* were the faithful in Israel who were waiting and praying for deliverance. Faithful believers had been doing this since their captivity in Babylon six centuries before. This time their prayers received a very special answer.

As Zechariah discharged his duty in the Holy Place, an angel of the Lord *appeared to him*. The *right* side indicates a position of favor or blessing, perhaps indicating that the message was good, not fore-boding. The exact location where the angel stood is a detail passed along by Zechariah himself and kept intact by writers (Luke 1:1-3). Only two angels are mentioned by name in Scripture—Michael and Gabriel—but many angels act as God’s messengers. Here, Gabriel (1:19) 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. (For 2 other significant revelations that occurred at the temple, see 1 Samuel 3:4-14; and Isaiah 6:1-13).