

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS.
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE I. 18–25.

18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings.

20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple.

22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among men.

WE see in this passage, *the power of unbelief in a good man*. Righteous and holy as Zacharias was, the announcement of the angel appears to him incredible. He cannot think it possible that an old man like himself should have a son. “Whereby shall I know this?” he says, “for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.”

A well-instructed Jew, like Zacharias, ought not to have raised such a question. No doubt he was well acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures. He ought to have remembered the wonderful births of Isaac, and Samson, and Samuel in old times. He ought to have remembered that what God has done once, he can do again, and that with Him nothing is impossible. But he forgot all this. He thought of nothing but the arguments of mere human reason and sense. And it often happens in religious matters, that where reason begins, faith ends.

Let us learn wisdom from the fault of Zacharias. It is a fault to which God’s people in every age have been sadly liable. The histories of Abraham, and Isaac, and Moses, and Hezekiah, and Jehoshaphat, will all show us that a true believer may sometimes be overtaken by unbelief. It is one of the first corruptions which came into man’s heart in the day of the fall, when Eve believed the devil rather than God. It is one of the most deep-rooted sins by which a saint is plagued, and from which he is never entirely freed till he dies. Let us pray daily, “Lord increase my faith.” Let us not doubt that when God says a thing, that thing shall be fulfilled.

We see furthermore, in these verses, *the privilege and portion of God’s angels*. They carry messages to God’s Church. They enjoy God’s immediate presence. The heavenly messenger who appears to Zacharias, rebukes his unbelief by telling him who he is: “I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee.”

The name “Gabriel” would doubtless fill the mind of Zacharias with humiliation and self-abasement. He would remember it was that same Ga-

briel, who 490 years before had brought to Daniel the prophecy of the seventy weeks, and had told him how Messiah should be cut off. (Dan. ix. 26.) He would doubtless contrast his own sad unbelief, when peaceably ministering as a priest in God's temple, with the faith of holy Daniel when dwelling a captive at Babylon, while the temple at Jerusalem was in ruins. Zacharias learned a lesson that day which he never forgot.

The account which Gabriel gives of his own office, should raise in our minds great searchings of heart. This mighty spirit, far greater in power and intelligence than we are, counts it his highest honour to "stand in God's presence" and do His will. Let our aims and desires be in the same direction. Let us strive so to live, that we may one day stand with boldness before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. The way to this high and holy position is open before us. Christ has consecrated it for us by the offering of His own body and blood. May we endeavour to walk in it during the short time of this present life, that so we may stand in our lot with God's elect angels in the endless ages of eternity. (Dan. xii. 13.)

We see, finally, in this passage, *how exceeding sinful is the sin of unbelief in the sight of God*. The doubts and questionings of Zacharias brought down upon him a heavy chastisement. "Thou shalt be dumb," says the angel, "and not able to speak, because thou believest not my words."—It was a chastisement peculiarly suitable to the offence. The tongue that was not ready to speak the language of believing praise was struck dumb.—It was a chastisement of long continuance. For nine long months at least, Zacharias was condemned to silence, and was daily reminded, that by unbelief he had offended God.

Few sins appear to be so peculiarly provoking to God as the sin of unbelief. None certainly have called down such heavy judgments on men. It is a practical denial of God's Almighty power to doubt whether he can do a thing, when he undertakes to do it.—It is giving the lie to God to doubt whether he means to do a thing, when He has plainly promised that it shall be done.—The forty years wanderings of Israel in the wilderness, should never be forgotten by professing Christians. The words of St. Paul are very solemn: "They could not enter in because of unbelief." (Heb. iii. 19.)

Let us watch and pray daily against this soul-ruining sin. Concessions to it rob believers of their inward peace,—weaken their hands in the day of battle,—bring clouds over their hopes,—make their chariot wheels drive heavily. According to the degree of our faith will be our enjoyment of Christ's salvation,—our patience in the day of trial,—our victory over the world. Unbelief, in short, is the true cause of a thousand spiritual diseases, and once allowed to nestle in our hearts, will eat as doth a canker. "If ye will not believe, ye shall not be established." (Isaiah vii. 9.) In all that re-

spects the pardon of our sins, and the acceptance of our souls,—the duties of our peculiar station and the trials of our daily life,—let it be a settled maxim in our religion, to trust every word of God implicitly, and to beware of unbelief.

NOTES. LUKE I. 18–25.

- 18.—[*Whereby shall I know this.*] Let us note that there is a wide distinction between this question asked by Zacharias, and that asked by the Virgin Mary, at verse 34. The question of Zacharias implies a doubt of the whole thing announced by the angel. The question of Mary implies no doubt of the event, but is only directed to the manner of its accomplishment
- 19.—[*Gabriel.*] The word Gabriel means “God is my strength,” or “Man of God,” or “strength of God.” (*Cruden.*) It is the only clear example of an angel’s name in the Bible. “Michael,” in Dan. x. 21, and xii. 1, probably signifies the Lord Jesus, when compared with Rev. xii. 7.
- 20.—[*Dumb.*] By comparing this expression with verse 62, it would appear highly probable that Zacharias became deaf as well as dumb. Else, why should his friends communicate with him by signs?