



TEEN TREE OF LIFE GOD DOES HIS BEST WORK IN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATIONS

Part 3

August 23, 2020

Before you begin, ask yourself a very important question: Do you believe that Jesus Christ died on The Cross for all of your sins? If you answered yes, you will need to be sure that you are filled with The Holy Spirit. How do you do this? You name your sins to God The Father in His Son's Name. This is called Rebound. As a Christian, you must rebound any time you sin. This is taught in 1 JOH 1:9: *If we confess [name] our sins [directly to God], He [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Now, if you have never believed that Jesus Christ died on The Cross for all of your sins, all you have to do is say to yourself that you believe in Him and you are saved! The Bible verse which teaches us this is ACTS 16:31: *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."*

Last week, we learned that Zacharias, (who was a priest) and his wife Elizabeth, were an elderly couple who lived at the time of Herod the Great. Herod was the tyrannical ruler who murdered all the male children, who were two years of age and under, in Bethlehem and its suburbs in an attempt to get rid of the baby Jesus. They had been unable to have children and back then, being unable to conceive was considered a reason to be excommunicated from God. According to the Jewish Rabbis at that time, there were seven kinds of people who were excommunicated from God. Their list began: "A Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife and who has no child." (Wow!) But in spite of what their situation in life had been, we learn one very important fact about Zacharias and Elizabeth in **LUK 1:6 (New International Reader's Version): *Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God.*** What an admirable couple! These are the types of people we should aspire to be like.

Their story continues this way: ***One day Zacharias's group was on duty. He was serving as a priest in God's temple. He happened to be chosen, in the usual way, to go into the temple of the Lord. There he was supposed to burn incense. The time came for this to be done. All who had gathered to worship were praying outside. (LUK 1:8-10 New International Reader's Version)*** Finally being chosen was a GREAT honor for him.

Now, working as **“a priest in God’s temple”** involved very complicated rituals and procedures. Each day, there were about 50 priests on duty in the Temple. In the early morning, before daylight, the priests divided into two groups to make a torchlight inspection of the Temple courtyards. The two groups then met and marched in two columns to the Hall of Hewn Polished Stones. This was where the day’s duties were assigned by lot. Assigning by lot is somewhat similar to drawing straws or throwing dice. The lots could be different colors or shapes of stone, or stones with markings or symbols made on them. Sticks might also be used in place of stones. The lot was used four times during the day: twice before the gate was opened, and twice after. Choosing by lot prevented personal ego or favoritism from having a part in the selections of priests.

When their day began, the coals of the previous day’s fire would still be glowing on the altar of burnt offering. The priest, chosen by lot, stirred the fire into fresh flame. Then another lot was taken to designate those who were to take part in the sacrifice itself. There were some priests in the Holy Place who had the job preparing the Altar of Incense.

Other priests had the job of trimming the wicks of the golden Menorah and adding oil.

The Menorah is described in the Bible by the prophet Zechariah as the seven-lamp ancient Hebrew lampstand made of pure gold and used in the portable sanctuary set up by Moses in the wilderness and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. Fresh olive oil of the purest quality was burned daily to light its lamps. The Menorah also symbolizes the creation in seven days, with the center light representing the Sabbath.

Right before dawn (and before the worshippers were admitted), the Sacrificial Lamb was brought out and inspected to make sure it was fit for sacrifice. It was given water from a golden bowl, and then it was laid on the north side of the altar with its face to the west. Then the gates were opened to the people who were there to worship.

All of the priests and the people were present as the officiating priest, standing on the east side of the altar, sprinkled the lamb’s blood from a golden bowl on two sides of the altar, below the red line which marked the difference between ordinary sacrifices and those which were to be wholly consumed by fire.

In the meantime, other chosen priests made everything ready in the Holy Place, where the most solemn ceremony of the day was to take place. This ceremony was offering the incense which symbolized Israel’s prayers being accepted by God. Again, a lot was taken to decide which priest was to be honored with this highest act of mediation between God and man. This was what Zacharias was chosen to do! This particular lot selection was preceded by prayer and the priests’ declaration of faith.

What’s fascinating in Zacharias’s story, is that a priest could only perform this task once in his entire lifetime. Also, each group of priests was on duty only twice a year and were not forced into retirement when they got older; instead, they were retired when they became sick or physically unable to do their priestly duties. Because of this, these honorable positions lasted a lifetime, which made the odds of being selected even greater!!

When he was finally chosen by lot, Zacharias's first task was to select two friends or relatives to help him in the sacred service. Their duties were completely spelled out. The first helper removed what had been left on the altar of incense from the previous evening's service; then, in prayer, he walked backward away from the altar. The second helper then came forward and spread live coals taken from that morning's burnt offering; then he, too, worshipped and left. As the people and other priests waited outside, Zacharias stood alone in the Holy Place, which was lit only by the golden Menorah which was to his left.

In front of Zacharias, at some distance, toward the heavy Veil that hung before the Holy of Holies, was the Golden Altar of Incense, on which red coals glowed, as near as possible to the Holy of Holies. To his right was the Table of Showbread. These were loaves which were a symbolic acknowledgment that God was the resource for Israel's life and nourishment; they also served as Israel's act of thanksgiving to God.

Zacharias had to wait until a special signal indicated that the moment had come. He walked forward and spread the incense on the altar. The priests and the people had reverently moved back from the altar in the courtyard, and were stretched out on the ground with their faces downward. In this position, they offered unspoken prayer and thanksgiving for God's mercies, provision, and deliverance, along with petitions for blessing and peace. A cloud of smoke from the incense began to form and move upward in the Holy Place.

Burning incense may sound like a mundane, boring job, but at the time, it was considered a great privilege. It was a big deal for Zacharias to perform this task because there were 20,000 or more priests who lived in or around Jerusalem, and many of them never had this privilege. It wouldn't be unheard of, for a man to go through all his years as a priest and never be drawn by lot to enter into the Holiest Place of all. So, really, Zacharias knew with certainty that he was about to have one of the greatest moments of his life. But he had no idea that even this experience would be insignificant when compared to what was about to happen to him.

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