

Helps for Young Christians.

No 18.

ZACHARIAS

AND

ELISABETH

OR

Filled with the Holy Ghost.

BY

H. P. BARKER

*Author of Gospel Echoes, True Incidents, Our Future,
The Bible and How to read it, etc., etc.*

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Zacharias and Elisabeth.

Luke i.

AS this is one of a series of booklets intended for the help of *young* believers, some may wonder why we should write of those whom the Scriptures do not introduce to us till they were both "well stricken in years." It is because the lessons that we learn from their lives are of supreme importance to the very youngest amongst us.

What an exemplary character was that of Zacharias! He was "righteous before God" (verse 6). This does not mean that he was sinless or that he possessed a righteousness of his own that would entitle him to a place in heaven, for this would contradict the truth that "there is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans iii. 10). It simply means that the whole tenor of his life was the love and practice of the right, so that God could look down upon him and see the fruit of His own grace manifested in the life of His servant. He walked "in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless." It is possible for one still unsaved, and with a heart full of raging hatred against Christ, to do this, (as we learn from Philippians iii. 6), for it is not a question of the soul's relationship with God, but of outward conformity with stated commandments.

But Zacharias was not like Saul, the persecutor of the saints. He was one who had been born of God. He was

a man of prayer

too; and we gather that even to old age he had not ceased praying for a son (verse 13). His faith, however, was not of a very robust order,

and even when Gabriel was sent to tell him that his prayer was heard, he was slow to believe (verse 20).

Still, in spite of his limitations he served the Lord, all through " the days of his ministration " (verse 23). And this was no perfunctory and mechanical service ; it was performed in the fear of God. " He executed the priest's office *before God* " (verse 8).

Elisabeth, his wife, shared the blameless life of Zacharias. But the longing of her heart had been denied her. Every Jewish woman ardently desired a son. Without one, her life was reckoned to be more or less a failure.

May we pause here to enquire of the reader whether there has not been much disappointing failure in connection with his or her Christian life ?

When you were first brought to know the Saviour, what happy times you anticipated ! You were going to be so earnest and warmhearted ; so constant in prayer ; so diligent in your study of the Bible ; so victorious over sin and temptation ; so zealous in your Master's service.

And the reality has been so different. Often you have had to chide yourself for your cold-heartedness, your lack of fervency in prayer, your loss of appetite for Bible study, your weakness in yielding to temptation, your failure to carry on your service to Christ on the basis of secret communion with Himself. Truly a life marred by failure and full of disappointment !

Yet outwardly your life may have been as free from blame, as strictly conformed to the recognized standards of right, as the lives of Zacharias and Elisabeth. This, however, does not satisfy you. You are conscious that there is something lacking, though perhaps you can not say what it is.



You have met Christians who seem to possess something that is outside your experience. They have a joy which you can see is quite beyond that of which you have an occasional taste. What does it all mean?

Please observe very carefully what I am about to bring to your notice. Both Zacharias and Elisabeth in their old age were *filled with the Holy Ghost*. This made all the difference.

Elisabeth was filled first and the result was a wonderful outburst of testimony, praise and faith. She bore witness of the yet unborn Saviour, calling Him "my Lord," and affirmed her confidence in the fulfilment of all things promised in connection with Him (verses 41-45).

Zacharias was filled later (verse 67). His unbelief vanished, and the lips that had been silent through lack of faith were opened in glorious and triumphant song.

This great and amazing experience came to this aged couple at well nigh the end of their lives. It revolutionised their outlook and lifted them on to a higher level of spiritual life.

May we have a little talk together on this important subject of what it means to be filled with the Holy Ghost?

We are nowhere bidden to be *born* of the Holy Spirit, nor to be sealed, anointed, indwelt or baptised of Him. These things are not to be the objects of pursuit for the Christian, for they are

Already true of every one of us.

We have been born of God, by His Spirit
John i. 13; iii. 5-8.

We have been sealed with the Holy Spirit
Ephesians i. 13; iv. 30.

We have been anointed (II Cor. i. 21) and
baptised (I Cor. xii. 13) by the Spirit.

These, therefore, are not things for which we have to pray. They are things for which we have to give thanks. They are already ours.

Not so with the *filling* with the Holy Spirit. We are definitely bidden to "*be filled with the Spirit*" (Ephesians v. 18). What exactly does this mean? What will be the result? How will it show itself?

Let us first observe that, unlike being *sealed* with the Spirit, being filled is not an exclusively *Christian* blessing. Zacharias and Elisabeth, though beloved saints of God, were not Christians. In saying this, I am not thinking of the verse that tells us that "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." For they were Christians before they were called so. But Zacharias and Elisabeth were not. They lived in pre-Christian days, before the redemption work of Calvary was accomplished, and before Christ had risen from the dead, ascended to heaven and sent down the Holy Spirit. There were no Christians before Pentecost!

But again and again we find chosen men of God, of whom His Spirit took control, even as early as the days of Moses. Bezaleel was one such. He was filled with the Spirit of God. (Exodus xxxi. 3). What is said of others such as Othniel (Judges iii. 10), Gideon (Judges vi. 34), and Amasai (1 Chron. xii. 18) seems to indicate that they too were thus endowed. The marginal reading of, for instance 1 Chron. xii. 18, is "the Spirit clothed Amasai," clearly indicating that the Spirit of God took complete control of this man as a vessel chosen for a certain purpose. This appears to be very much the same as the New Testament "*filling*," except that the "*clothing*" was temporary and for a certain object, whereas the "*filling*" is to be constant

and is for a purpose that is to be continually our aim.

We are to be "filled with the Spirit," not that we may be wonderful people, or do wonderful things, or have wonderful experiences, but that

Christ may be exalted in us.

We learn this if we study the cases in the Acts of the Apostles of those who were thus filled.

Peter was "filled with the Holy Ghost" (iv. 8) and immediately bore witness to Christ, to His resurrection and glory, and to the fact that salvation is through His Name alone. Not a word as to the speaker's own blessing, joy or spiritual experience!

Stephen was "full of the Holy Ghost" (vii. 55) and, as a result, his vision was filled with Christ, and he bore testimony to His glory.

Barnabas was "full of the Holy Ghost" (xi. 24). This led him, not to secure disciples for himself or adherents to his ministry, but to exhort those who had recently received the gospel to cleave to the Lord, to have *HIM* as the object of their souls' devotion.

Saul, the persecutor, was converted that he might be "filled with the Holy Ghost" (ix. 17). As thus filled, he confronted the sorcerer Elymas and called him a child of the devil (xiii. 9,10). A man who is filled with the Holy Ghost does not give currency to the lie that all men are children of God. He knows nothing of the false charity that refuses to call wickedness by its true name. He takes up an attitude of uncompromising hostility to evil in every form.

But it was not only eminent servants of the Lord like Peter and Paul, Stephen and Barnabas, that were filled. The nameless disciples at Antioch in Pisidia were "filled with joy and with the

Holy Ghost" (xiii. 52). They were taken possession of by the blessed Spirit of God that their hearts might be filled with Christ's love, and that their lives might be luminous with His praise as they walked in His ways and suffered for His Name.

It is something, then, for which we should seek. For to be "filled with the Spirit" simply means that He controls us on behalf of Christ. It is not that He fills us *from the outside*, but that, already abiding within us, He takes more complete possession of our souls and of our lives, in order that Christ may be glorified therein. A guest in a house does not fill it; he confines himself to certain parts of the house, and exercises no authority. But if, for any reason, the house is put entirely into his charge, he then fills it and exercises control in every part. It is even so with the Holy Spirit. He wants to dwell in us, not as a guest, but as

the One who is in control.

It is to our own loss if we confine Him to certain departments of our lives. Let us put under His control the business department, the domestic department, the social department, the religious department,—*every* department of our lives. Let us thus "be filled with the Spirit," that our lives may be fruitful for the glory of Christ.

Though we write for young believers, may we remind any older friend that may read these pages that none are too old to seek to be filled with the Spirit? The case of Zacharias and Elisabeth is ample proof of this. How lovely it is to meet with a dear aged brother or sister who is full of the Holy Spirit! On the other hand, none are too young to be thus filled. The case of the son given to this aged couple in

answer to prayer proves this. He was "filled with the Holy Ghost" from the hour of his birth (Luke i. 15). It was exceptional and even miraculous in the case of John of course, but it shows that the youngest believer may be filled, equally with the most mature.

But however great the blessing that came to Zacharias and Elizabeth in the evening of their days, let us repeat that *they were not Christians*. For us who *are* Christians better things are provided than were ever known even by the most shining saints in pre-Christian days. We are distinctly taught this in Hebrews xi. 40. In the latter part of this booklet I want to point out wherein the days of Zacharias and Elisabeth came short, in point of privilege, of the days in which we live.

Read the narrative in Luke i. 5-25 once more. I know of no one who has written on the first two chapters of Luke without using the word "exquisite." These chapters certainly present us with a charming picture of some of the excellent of the earth, a sample of the God-fearing men and women who lived during the interval of 400 years between Old Testament and New Testament times.

They were people who looked for something: "the consolation of Israel" and "the redemption of Jerusalem." And their common hope drew them together in expectation and prayerful longing.

But Christianity is an advance upon all this, and is based upon what to-day are facts, but which were not facts in pre-Christian days. We shall find, I think, at least six instructive contrasts between what obtained in the times immediately before the coming of Christ and what is true in our day. We see that there was:—

I.—No Access to God.

While Zacharias was offering incense within the Temple, the people had to remain outside. Nor dared Zachariās himself enter the sacred enclosure called the Holiest. Only the High Priest, and he but once a year, might enter with the sacrificial blood. Neither priest nor people had free access. The veil had not been rent.

In ancient times, especially in the early days of the Roman empire, it was death to a slave to approach or address his master without leave. In times still earlier, the Kings of Persia would not permit even their consorts to draw near to them upon the throne unless specially bidden, and to approach without permission was punishable by death (Esther iv. 11).

But in Christianity, not only the privileged Jew, but the despised, idol-worshipping Gentile, purged from his sins by Christ's most precious blood, has direct access to God, and to God revealed as Father. We are taught this in Eph. ii. 18. Nor is it merely that we have, through Christ, the *title* to enter. By the Holy Spirit we are actually brought there; we are led in through the door that the work of Christ has flung wide open, there to dwell with the Father, in the atmosphere of holy love, and in the joy of His fulfilled counsels, taught of Him by His beloved Son.

II.—No Knowledge of Sonship.

When Zacharias saw the angel, *fear* fell upon him (i. 12). One may say this was only natural. But was it? Does the little son of a noble family *fear* the butler, though he have been a servant in the house for forty years? The saints in pre-Christian days were in a condition of tutelage (Gal. iv. 1-3), like minors who are unaware of the relationship into which they have

been born and the heritage that is theirs. Such may well have a certain amount of fear in the presence of the elder and valued servants of the house.

We find, therefore, that there was no calling God "Father" on the part of these dear people, nor even "Heavenly Father," a title taught to those who companied with the Lord on earth but never used in the Acts, Epistles, or Revelation. They knew, of course, God's loving kindness and His tender mercies, but the love of the Father, resting in all its fulness, not only upon His beloved Son, but on those who are His, was a thing of which they did not dream.

III.—No Promptitude of Faith.

Zacharias was a man of prayer, but his faith was feeble; he was "slow of heart to believe." (see i. 20). But in Christianity a ready faith was early observed as one of the characteristics, even of those very young in the family of God. The Thessalonian converts had neither the knowledge of the Scriptures nor the spiritual experiences that Zacharias had, yet their newborn faith was of such an order that everybody knew of it (1 Thess. i. 8). So with the erstwhile Colossian idolators; their faith in Christ Jesus had become their most noticeable feature. It was to produce this ready "obedience of faith" on the part of Gentiles that Paul received his apostleship (Rom. i. 5; xvi. 26), and on this the work of God in the soul is founded.

IV.—No Ability to Praise.

To praise, that is, according to the revealed will of God. The unbelief of Zacharias shut him up in silence (i. 20) and in deafness (verse 62). Apart from the work of God, which by-and-by wrought such a change, there was no ability to

receive or to respond to any revelation from God.

Praise still *waits* for Jehovah in Zion ; Zion is silent Godward to-day, and deaf to His voice. But in Christianity ears are unstopped and lips unsealed. The *singing* of Christians is characteristic. Other religions may have their " sacred hymns " but who ever heard of a Mohammedan or a Buddhist or, for the matter of that, a Jew, singing a song of victory at a funeral ? Trial—and what a sore trial is the loss of loved ones !—is a great test, yet even bereavement but serves as an occasion to bring out the fact that the Christian can *in everything* give thanks, and that the love of Christ is as a table spread with choicest dainties, even in the presence of the greatest enemy of all.

V.—No Spontaneity or Elasticity of Worship.

The ritual which Zacharias was performing in the Temple had its appointed form, and the time it took to go through it was well known. Hence, when the time arrived for Zacharias to come out, the people marvelled at his tarrying. They were convinced that something unusual must have happened. All had become so cut and dried that when the allotted time was exceeded, people were astonished.

One may say, " But is not the breaking of bread a bit of ritual ? " It is a holy rite, certainly. But think of the spontaneity of everything connected with it, and the elasticity of the rite itself. Some Christians, finishing their ordinary supper, cleared the board, set on bread and wine, and with bowed heads remembered their Lord for a few minutes before retiring to rest,—a happy and a holy way of ending the day. It was the Lord's Supper. In other cases

it is made the central feature of a meeting of perhaps two hours, where opportunity is found for the outgoings of glad and grateful hearts in remembrance and praise, and where holy worship ascends to the Father's ear. It is, again, the Lord's Supper. It may be eaten under a tree, on board a ship, or under almost any conditions. No ritual is prescribed; no inspired hymns are provided for singing on these occasions (as in the case of the Temple services); no special portions of Scripture are appointed to be read; no directions given for a particular order to be followed. All is elastic and spontaneous, with room for the Lord to lead His own, and for the ever-present Spirit to enable them to recognise the guidance of Christ. This surely, is in harmony with the genius of Christianity.

VI.—No Appreciation of the Purposes of God.

God was about to send the greatest of earth-born prophets to herald the coming of Israel's God and King. Zacharias was selected as the father of this chosen vessel, filled, as he was to be, with the Holy Spirit, from the hour of his birth. Elisabeth, his wife, acknowledges it all to be of God, but in her utterance of thanksgiving (i. 25) she shows the limit of her understanding by declaring, "The Lord hath looked upon me *to take away my reproach* among men."

Oh! So it was Elisabeth that was the great object of the present ways of God, was it? And His great aim, it seems, was to relieve her of a reproach that was painful to her! So we should gather from her words.

But knowing that *Christ* is ever the Object of all God's workings, we wonder at the lack of apprehension that Elisabeth displays. God was..

giving her a son, not to take away her reproach but to be the forerunner of the Christ.

It is sadly possible for Christians to fall into a paltry littleness and to regard their own blessing as the central aim of God in His present ways. But it should not, and need not, be so. God has revealed to us His great and gracious designs, all centering in Christ, and having His glory and pleasure as their object. And it is for us to enter into these, not with self-filled but with Christ-filled hearts.

One is reminded of a question asked by a newly converted man in Cumberland some years ago: "Will you tell me something about God's present plans for the glory of Christ?" There spoke a truly *Christian* heart, one longing to enter further into God's great thoughts as to His Son, as it is the privilege of Christians to do.

People may sing:—

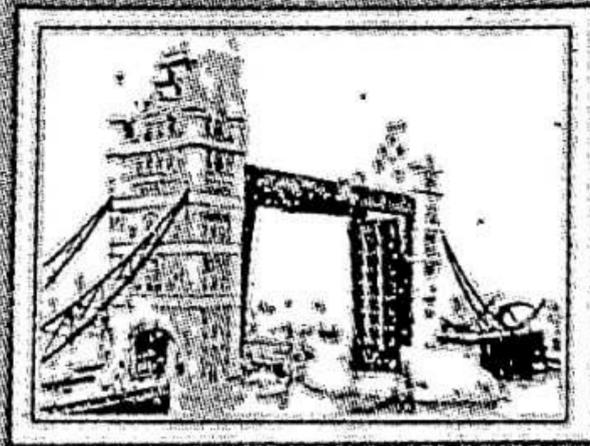
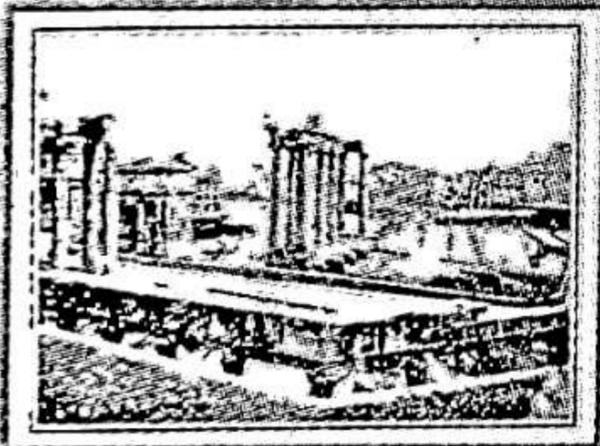
"I am not skilled to understand
What God hath willed, what God hath planned."

But since it is a question neither of skill nor of scholarship, but of *heart*, it is to be feared that what is really meant, too often, is that they do not care to understand, but are content with knowing that they are safe for ever.

My desire in calling attention to all this is not that it may be a matter of academic interest merely, but that we may get a truer insight into what real Christianity is, that we may be numbered not only among those that live godly, but among those that live godly, distinctively *in Christ Jesus* (II Timothy iii. 12).

H. P. BARKER.

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