THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST FORETOLD

Luke 1:5–25

Key Verse: 1:13

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.’”

Do you ever feel like God is not there? People don’t seem to be paying much attention to him. He doesn’t seem to be paying much attention to us, either. Prayer can seem pretty useless. It’s so common to feel this way. Today’s passage tells us the backstory of how the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, was born. It was a time when it seemed like God was no longer there, and his people didn’t matter anymore. On the surface this passage may seem like a simple story, but it actually has some deep lessons for our lives today. We especially want to learn more about God and about how he still works in the world. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his life-giving word.

**First**, Zechariah and Elizabeth (5–7). Verse 5 begins, “In the days of Herod, king of Judea…” Writers at that time would often begin by mentioning the current ruler, and in this case Luke mentions Herod. This is none other than Herod the Great, who ruled for 33 years, from 37–4 BC. History tells us many details about him. But for the Jews it may be that he had two main legacies. One was that in his paranoia he had his own wife killed. The other was that under his influence, God’s people were rapidly becoming more secular. There’s been a lot written about Herod. But Luke says very briefly, “In the days of Herod…” to point simply to a dark time in Israel’s history.

In contrast, Luke goes on to write: “…there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth” (5b). It’s a bit unusual for both husband and wife to be from priestly families. They both had a strong spiritual heritage. But there’s more. Read verse 6. They aren’t just relying on the faith of their ancestors; they both have a personal, living faith. Not just the wife, not just the husband, but both of them have faith. Luke’s description pays them the highest spiritual compliment: “righteous before God” and “walking blamelessly in all his commandments and statutes.” What does it mean to do this? Each day they’re living in God’s presence, believing God is real, that God is watching everything. They’re centering their lives on God, not on using him but on pleasing him. The word “walking” suggests their faith isn’t once in a while, but every day. To be “walking” in God’s commandments and statutes, they’ve made the Bible essential to their everyday life. They’re sincerely seeking to live according to God’s words. They read his word not for the sake of knowledge, but to build their lives on doing what he says. At a time when many people have turned away from God, they are faithful to him. In this chapter Luke mentions this couple quite a bit. To Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth are more important than Herod the Great.

But they have a problem. Read verse 7. In their society childlessness is devastating. Later Elizabeth calls it a “reproach” or shame (25). People are judging them, that God isn’t pleased with them for some reason. But Luke makes it clear in verse 6 that this is not the case. God in his sovereign wisdom and plan has simply withheld children from them. But this difficulty didn’t cause them to doubt God. They stayed faithful to God and trusted him, even though they couldn’t have children. Their faith is genuine. And during all that time of waiting God has been deepening their faith, to prepare them for something wonderful.

**Second**, the people praying (8–10). Zechariah’s division of priests happens to be on duty, which lasted about two weeks, when, lo and behold, Zechariah himself gets chosen by lot to go into the temple of the Lord to burn incense (8,9). God is orchestrating to have a personal meeting with him. Look at verse 10. There’s a multitude of people praying outside the temple. Why? In the broader context, they’re seeking God’s help. Life under Herod’s rule is hard. More than that, they’ve had no clear spiritual leadership for hundreds of years. Their people are going astray. And so they’re turning to God in desperation. For Luke, prayer is an important theme. In his other book, Acts, the prayer of the community of believers is especially important (Ac1:14,24; 2:42; 4:31; 6:4; 12:5,12; 13:3; 14:23; 16:25; 21:5). We all face challenges in life, both as individuals or families, and as a community. Often we don’t know what to do. But we can turn to God and pray together. To clever people it may look foolish, but it’s actually the wisest thing we could do. We’re full of weaknesses and flaws, but God chooses to do his greater work in the world through communities who come to him and pray together.

**Third**, your prayer has been heard (11–13). When this elderly priest Zechariah goes into the temple of the Lord all by himself to burn incense, something amazing happens. Look at verses 11,12. The right side of the altar is the place favored by God. And it’s an angel standing there. Later we find he’s the archangel Gabriel (19). Angels are God’s messengers, and God has sent a most important one. Zechariah responds by being troubled and fearful. People considered God and his angels so holy that if they saw them, they might die.

And what happens? Read verse 13. It’s stunning. God is going to give Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth a son! Even in their old age! And there’s something else interesting here. It looks like all along, Zechariah has been praying for his barren wife to have a son. At that time such barrenness was grounds for divorce. With imaginary political intrigue Herod had had his own wife murdered. But Zechariah has been faithfully praying for his barren wife, even into their old age! What a guy! What a humble and faithful and loving man! There’s just one slight problem. As a priest chosen to go in and burn incense, Zechariah is supposed to be praying for all the people. But it looks like he couldn’t help himself; he just had to sneak in a prayer for his wife to have a son. But God doesn’t mind. God isn’t legalistic. In fact, God is using this very prayer, for a much greater purpose. It’s a simple but profound truth: God hears our prayer. We need reminding of this often. When it seems like no one is listening, no one understands, God does. We just need to keep talking to him, telling him everything, crying out to him for his help. God hears means he answers—in his own way and in his own time (1Jn5:14,15). Because God always hears, prayer is never a waste of time; quite the contrary, it’s the most important thing we can do.

In this case, God’s answer to prayer is humanly impossible: elderly Elizabeth is going to have a son. God loves to work in the midst of impossibilities. And the angel mentions that God has given a name to this baby: “John.” This name means “God is gracious.” God is gracious to barren Elizabeth. God is gracious to Zechariah. God is gracious to the praying people outside. In the midst of all our struggles, God is gracious to all of us.

**Fourth**, “a people prepared” (14–17). The angel goes on to say more about this child. First of all, he’s going to be a source of joy and gladness not only to Zechariah and Elizabeth but also to many others (14). And it’s not just because he’s being born to them after a lifetime of barrenness. Look at verse 15. This child will bring joy because he’s going to be great before the Lord. In a sense, every child is great, because each one is made in the image of God. But in this case, John’s greatness is going to come from having his whole life dedicated to God. Not getting drunk will allow him to be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. In the Bible, drunkenness often leads to many other sins, whereas being filled with the Spirit empowers us to be useful to God.

And how does God plan to use him? Read verses 16,17. In these verses we notice a repeated word: “turn.” For the author Luke, turning is an important meaning of repentance (Lk17:4; 22:32; Ac3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18,20; 28:27). Really turning to God prepares us to receive what he wants to give us. But it’s hard to make a turn. Spiritually speaking, it involves doing a 180°. Here it says to turn back “to the Lord [our] God,” and at the same time, to turn our hearts back “to [our] children,” and “to the wisdom of the just”—meaning those who live according to his word. This is real repentance—to actually turn our hearts to God, to our children, to those who need our help, and to living by God’s word instead of in our own way. Helping people to turn—to really change direction—it requires power. Read verse 17 again. The prophet Elijah was famous for the power of his spirit. Single-handedly he turned the entire nation away from idols to the living God. Likewise, even if we’re just a few, God can use us to turn people to him when we’re full of the Holy Spirit.

**Fifth**, believe my words (18–23). How does Zechariah respond to the angel? Look at verse 18. He can’t get his mind beyond the reality of their age—they’re just too old. And what does the angel say? Read verse 19. It’s getting “real serious.” And the angel goes on to tell him that now he’s going to be silent and unable to speak until the baby is born. The clincher is: “…because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” Zechariah had prayed so long for a son, but when God answers, he can’t believe it. What’s wrong with this guy? In verses 21–23 we see how the angel’s words come true. Zechariah can no longer speak. It’s embarrassing. People are wondering. One thing was clear: he had seen a vision in the temple. God isn’t being harsh with Zechariah. He really loves him. He’s helping him to quietly meditate on the truth of his word for the next nine months. It’s a great time for Zechariah to empty out all his human thoughts and focus on God and what he had said. More than anything else, godly parents and grandparents need to believe God’s words. Then they can be a good influence to their children and grandchildren.

**Sixth**, Elizabeth’s confession. Look at verse 24. The miraculous happens: elderly Elizabeth becomes pregnant! And what does she do? She keeps herself hidden for the first five months. Partly it’s to protect her health. But it’s also a quiet time for her to reflect on what has happened. Read verse 25. We saw earlier that God had “heard” Zechariah’s prayer. Now we see how he has “looked on” Elizabeth. He’s seen all that she’s been through—especially the sense of shame she’s lived with as a barren woman all those years. To be looked down upon all one’s life is really hard to bear. God sees and knows when we’re going through something like that. We may try to overcompensate in some other way, to win back people’s respect. But only God can take shame away from us and heal us.

Today we learned that God sees what we’re doing. He notices when we’re devoted to him no matter what and keep struggling to live by his word. Especially, he hears our prayers. He cares about our agonies. He sees even the shame we’ve been bearing. And when we live devoted lives, he sees us as the most important people in the world. He can use us, even with all our limitations, to accomplish great things, even to turn many people back to himself. We just need to keep believing his word and praying. May God help us experience his grace, his presence and his answer to prayer this Christmas season.