

Luke 1:5-25

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

- Being true to his ability to write with great detail and orderliness, Luke continues his letter by telling us of the birth of John, the forerunner to Jesus. He does this, beginning with a date that is based on historical facts.
- Luke says that the promise of the birth of John came during the reign of Herod. This is Herod the Great, who while being considered king of Judea, still submitted to the Roman emperor. Herod had reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C., so this event takes place near the end of his reign.
- During this same time, Luke tells us of Zecharias (whose name means “remembered of Jehovah”), who was a priest in the division of Abijah. This simply means that at some point, there were so many priests, that David had to divide the priesthood into 24 orders (See I Chron. 24:10; also II Chron. 8:14). Only at the Passover at Pentecost and the feast of Tabernacles did all the priests serve. Otherwise, they would split the work up in segments of time (one week at a time, twice a year). This service is something they looked forward to with great zeal and enthusiasm.
- The wife of Zecharias, who is called Elizabeth (which means, “One whose oath it with God”), was also from a priestly background being from the lineage of Aaron. For Zecharias, this was considered meritorious. Not only did he marry a woman of pure Jewish background, but he also married a woman from the lineage of Aaron. Remember that Jesus although from a priestly background, would not come from these orders of priests, but would be after the order of Melchizedek. John being born through this lineage could have had a place among the priests. Jesus being of the tribe of Judah would not have been able to hold this priestly office.

6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

- Luke wants to tell us of the character of Zechariah and Elizabeth and in doing so, he says, “**They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.**” This was the highest praise that could have been given to them. We often marvel when we read of someone who “walked with God” and or one who did, “according to all that God had commanded” (Gen. 6:9, 22). This is an amazing commentary on someone’s life. But this is the life that you and I are called to live each and every day.
- What Luke says next, would cause others to question the character of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He revealed that they were childless, and this was viewed as a curse on those who were ungodly. Since they were old, there didn’t seem to be much hope left for ever having a child either.

-The Holy Spirit reveals through Luke that they were righteous, and that their hope was about to change.

- 8 Now it happened {that} while he was performing his priestly service before God in the {appointed} order of his division,**
9 according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.
10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.
11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.
12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw {the angel} and fear gripped him.
13 But the angel said to him, " Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John".
14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

- A priest would have rarely had the opportunity to serve God by offering incense in the temple, since there were over 1000 priests per division. The lot fell on Zechariah through God's providence to offer it on this occasion. What a joy to have this opportunity to enter the courts of God in the holy place before the most holy place and fill the whole building with the incense on the altar (Ex. 30:7-8).

-This service was the most coveted of all the priestly duties...something usually only dreamed of by the many priests that would serve. It was said by Farrar that any one priest would never perform this work of service twice in his lifetime. Also, if the lot fell on you to offer incense one week, your name could not come up again in the same week.

-Incense and prayer were often mixed together. This is what the text tells us the many people were doing outside in the temple court, while Zechariah offered his priestly service. In Revelation 8:2-4, the text says, "And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand." In essence the prayers were offered with the incense so that symbolically they would rise together as a pleasing aroma to the Lord. (See also Rev. 5:8) What lesson can we learn about our prayer life, since the incense was to fill the temple of God continually? (I Thess. 5:17; "without ceasing").

-It seems that Zechariah was praying as well, or that he had been praying for something before that time. An angel appears in the temple next to the altar of incense with a message of answered prayer for Zechariah.

-As most of us would be, Zechariah was troubled by the angel's appearance, and to be completely serious, it probably scared him severely, as the text says, and "fear gripped him". The angel appeared to the right of Zecharias, between the altar of incense and the table of show bread during his Divine service.

- The angel quickly comforted him, in saying, **“Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John”**. This must have been some comfort to the ears of Zechariah as now he would be blessed not only with a son, but with the forerunner to the Christ (Messiah). God blessed him during faithful service.
- This wasn't a judgment against Zechariah, but a blessing to him. The prayer that Zechariah offered was really some kind of special supplication, as the Greek word used here informs us of such (deesis : supplication, from a word meaning to beg).
- While we cannot be certain what this plea was for, one thing is most likely certain...he was not praying for just any son but was praying for the Son, Jesus Christ to come. If he was praying for a child for himself, he didn't believe it was possible and God wouldn't have answered that prayer (See Luke 1:20 and James 1:6-7). It seems that in the process of only making atonement for the people that Zechariah wanted the Deliverer to come and offer complete forgiveness in His sacrifice. The good news was that not only would they be relieved of the communal curse of having no children, but they would also give birth to a son (John), that would usher in the coming of the Lord. What an answer to prayer. Rightly did the angel say, **“You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”**

- 15 **"For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.**
- 16 **"And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.**
- 17 **"It is he who will go {as a forerunner} before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."**
- 18 **Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this {for certain?} For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."**
- 19 **The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.**
- 20 **"And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."**

- As his parents were righteous in the sight of God, John would be great in His sight as well. In explaining the character of John, Luke writes by inspiration, **“he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.”** He is going to be sober minded and will live a pure life in service to God. From his birth, John would have the Holy Spirit to dwell within him and he would then use his life to glorify God (Compare to I Cor. 6:19-20).

- Since John was a living example of a servant of God, the text goes on to say, **“And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.”** When we live to the glory of God and do His Divine will, others will turn to Him.
- Others will turn to God in Christ, since John came as the one who would fulfill OT prophecy, **“TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** This prophecy was made nearly 400 years before Zechariah’s vision (See Mal. 4:5-6). Indeed, it is said of John, that he, **“will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.”** Keep in mind that this is the first revelation from God, since Malachi prophesied. What a privilege to be the first one to hear God speak after such a long period of silence!
- As we prepare people for the coming of the Lord in judgment, we too need to be sober minded, spiritual people that live according to God’s will. We are taught that through a life of good, we can lead others to give glory to God (See Matt. 5:16).
- John will be a forerunner to Jesus (one who goes ahead of) that is like Elijah in spirit and power, to turn the people back to God. This would suggest that the people had turned away from God, and historical facts tell us that this is indeed what took place during Herod’s reign. The people had lost their sense of direction and were following after the evil in the world.
- Today, as we examine our world, we can see how the people have turned away from God. So many aspects of our culture has been influenced by the world and God’s people are the only hope for leading people to “the Christ”, the Savior of the world.
- Like John, we are all messengers of the good news and hope that can be found in the Messiah. We are told to preach this gospel in “all the world”, with the desire and prayer that people would turn back to God in Christ.
- Noticing the language of the text, we can see that family life in Israel must have been troubled during this time, as one of John’s missions was to reunite the fathers and the children. Some have suggested that the fathers had sided with Rome and had abandoned their families.
- O’ what a cry needs to be sounded in this area of family life today, for a return to God. Fatherless homes are everywhere, due to divorce, homosexuality and abandonment. This is not God’s will for the home (Eph. 6:4).
- Another aspect of John’s mission was to turn the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous. The righteous are the obedient in Christ. Those who disobey will be punished with everlasting destruction and an eternal separation from the Lord (See II Thess. 1:7-9)
- We who understand this truth need not only to be obedient ourselves, but we need to be willing to help others to turn to obedience as well. John was going to introduce Jesus as the one to whom we are to listen to and obey. We must do the same for others today.
- John would be preparing the people for the Lord, in that he would be preaching repentance and the coming of the kingdom of the Christ. When Christ would make his debut, then others would have their hearts ready to hear and heed his message.

- As we expect others to obey the gospel today, we need to be willing to announce the coming of Christ for judgment so that people will be prepared for that great day. (I Pet. 4:7; II Pet. 3:11-12)
- Next, we need to take a moment to comment on Zechariah's response and the consequences that were the result. When the angel revealed God's answer to his prayer, Zechariah did not believe the message of the angel. (Heb. 1:14)
- This doubt was most likely associated with the way God chose to answer his prayer. Sometimes God answers prayer in ways that we least expect. We need to be careful what we ask for and be ready to accept what He gives us.
- How much more could God have done than to send a glorified spokesperson (angel Gabriel) to reveal His message. As a matter of fact, when Zechariah did not believe, the Angel Gabriel said, **"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."** An angel came from the presence of God and he still had doubts.
- While we might want to be hard on Zechariah, permit me to say that there are a great many righteous people who doubt and question God's moves in their lives, when they should have full trusting faith.
- The consequence of Zechariah's doubts is seen in that he was unable to speak the message that was revealed to him by the angel. The text reads, **"And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."**

- 21 The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple.**
- 22 But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute.**
- 23 When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home.**
- 24 After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying,**
- 25 "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked {with favor} upon {me} to take away my disgrace among men."**
(NAU)

- By this time, the people had finished praying and were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the temple. The people knew that when you entered the temple, you did not have any unnecessary delays (no longer than ½ hour). The work accomplished there was very serious and was to be approached reverently. It was customary for the priest to come out and bless the people after his time in service to God in the temple. When he could not speak a single word to the people, they knew something had happened.

- Zechariah was trying to give signals and symbols to explain what had transpired, but a word would not proceed from his mouth. It seems that he finished his priestly duty, while still remaining mute. When someone came face to face with a heavenly being, there was a lingering aura on them that told others they had seen a vision. It appears that between this concept and his hand gestures, is how the people knew he had seen a vision.
- The text then turns attention to Elizabeth and her pregnancy. We are told that for some reason, Elizabeth retires to seclusion for 5 months. Some have suggested it was for considering how she might train her child to perform this preparatory work for God in the coming of the Messiah. Others mention how she may have been hiding from others, lest they question her uprightness. Whatever others may suspect about this time in seclusion the text simply records Elizabeth's words, "**This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked {with favor} upon {me} to take away my disgrace among men**". One psalmist penned these words in Psalm 113:9, "He makes the barren woman abide in the house {as} a joyful mother of children. Praise the LORD!" Perhaps Elizabeth was spending time praising God for His mercy and goodness toward her.
- God indeed looked down upon this couple with favor, but he shows this same favor to all of us in His Son, Jesus Christ. God gave every one of us a Son...His only begotten Son.
- Let us never doubt His plans for us in Christ, but rather let us commit ourselves to Him as His children with thanksgiving in our hearts, in His service. Praises be to our God for his mercy and grace.
- One final point to examine is that God not only gave us His Son, but he also took away our disgrace among men. Our disgrace may not be the lack of a child as in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth. But our disgrace among men, is to be associated with sin. When God gave us Jesus, he not only gave us His Son, but gave us the hope of redemption through the forgiveness of sins (Gal. 3:26-27; Acts 2:38-39)