

A Special Promise

Lesson for December 4, 2022

Unit I: God Prepares the Way

Scriptural Background: Luke 1:5-23

Printed Text: Luke 1:8-20

Key verse: *But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. (Luke 1:13, NIV)*

Word Study

Middle Age is the last laugh before old age is no laughing matter. People in middle-age can identify with his piece of humor titled "Middle Age":

Maybe it's true that life begins at fifty, but everything else starts to wear out, fall out, or spread out.

There are three signs of old age. The first is your loss of memory, the other two I forget.

You're getting old when you don't care where your spouse goes, just as long as you don't have to go along.

Middle age is when work is a lot less fun - and fun a lot more work.

You know you're getting on in years when the girls at the office start confiding in you.

Middle age is when it takes longer to rest than to get tired.

By the time a man is wise enough to watch his step, he's too old to go anywhere.

Middle age is when you have stopped growing at both ends and have begun to grow in the middle.

A man has reached middle age when he is cautioned to slow down by his doctor instead of by the police.

Middle age is having a choice of two temptations and choosing the one that will get you home earlier.

Don't worry about avoiding temptation. As you grow older, it will avoid you.

The aging process could be slowed down if it had to work its way through Congress.

You're getting old when getting lucky means you find your car in the parking lot.

You're getting old when you're sitting in a rocker and you can't get it started.

You're getting old when you wake up with that morning-after feeling, and you didn't do anything the night before.

Notes collected and developed by Ethel Williams

The cardiologist's diet: if it tastes good, spit it out.

It's hard to be nostalgic when you can't remember anything.

You know you're getting old when you stop buying green bananas.

In today's lesson, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have reached this point in their life. The Bible states, "... Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old." It is at this point that Zechariah is visited by the angel Gabriel who relates a very special promise from God.

Key Terms

1. **Believe** (verse 20) – To have faith in, trust in; to think to be true, place confidence in.
2. **Elizabeth** (verse 13) – Wife of Zechariah and mother of John the Baptist; was of the priestly family of Aaron. "**Elisabeth**" (KJV)
3. **Gabriel** (verse 19) – A messenger of God; an archangel. The name Gabriel translated from Hebrew means: God is my strength or God is my hero.
4. **Zechariah** (verse 13) – A priest of the order of Abijah. The father of John the Baptist; should not be confused with the Old Testament Prophet by the same name. "**Zacharias**" (KJV)

Lesson Background

While Luke's name never appears in this gospel, ancient Christian tradition unanimously ascribes the book to him. One ancient prologue written to introduce the gospel describes Luke as a Syrian from Antioch. With this piece of information, we can deduce that Luke was probably not Jewish. Paul also listed him with other Gentiles in his greetings to the Colossians (4:14). The ancient prologue goes on to state that Luke eventually settled in the Greek city of Thebes, where he died at age 84. (Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development*)

Luke wrote his gospel knowing that many had already written histories of the life of Jesus. Having already read Matthew and Mark's account, Luke wanted to give a third account with an emphasis on comprehensiveness and order. Therefore, Luke is the most *comprehensive* gospel. He documents the story of Jesus' all the way from the annunciation of John the Baptist to Jesus' ascension.

Luke's own introduction to his gospel indicates that Luke composed the letter with the purpose of providing a careful rendering of the events of Christ's life in chronological order. As a physician, Luke would have been trained as a careful observer, a quality that would have been invaluable in this project.

Lesson In Depth

I. Duty (Luke 1:8-11)

Prior to this outline, Luke introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth (verses 5-7). On the one hand, the description of this couple reveals those characteristics which would have made them unacceptable to their contemporaries in Judaism. On the other hand, we are given those positive

qualities for which they found favor with God, and which were the basis for God's selection of them as the parents of John.

1. So far as Judaism was concerned, Zechariah and Elizabeth were obscure and insignificant people, who were not of sufficient social or economic standing to have been granted the privilege of being the parents of John. Zechariah was a priest, but not one of great renown. Neither by his training nor by his place of residence was Zechariah set apart as a cut above his peers. In our terminology, this couple were from some small town in those uplands, south of Jerusalem: the historic 'hill-country of Judaea. And where one came from did matter to the Jews.

2. Zechariah and Elizabeth were elderly and without children. There was a tremendous stigma attached to being without children, one which the woman probably felt most keenly. It may well have been thought that their predicament was the "judgment of God," for some sin they had committed. This fact would also have weighed very heavily against Zechariah and Elizabeth, if the choice of John's parents were the decision of their peers, and not the sovereign choice of God.

3. Zechariah was a priest, and both he and his wife were both descendants of Aaron (the brother of Moses; Luke 1:5). It seems to have been important to God that John be of the priestly line, even though his function was largely prophetic.

4. More important than their physical lineage was their spiritual devotion. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were described by Luke as "righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord" (1:6). Not only was this a priestly couple, but they were a pious couple as well. Their lives were lived in obedience to the Law of Moses. This would not have been perfect obedience, but an obedience which met the requirements of Judaism.

And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course: The priesthood remained in a certain family who were called of God to tend to the affairs of the temple. Zechariah was of a priestly family and his job was to burn incense twice a day in the temple. There were many priests in those days and thus the priestly duties were allocated according to divisions of priests (1 Chronicles 24). When it came time for the order of Abijah's division (vv. 5, 8) to perform the temple duties, Zechariah went to Jerusalem

To burn incense: According to the Law of Moses, incense was offered to God on the golden altar every morning and every evening (Exodus 30:7-8). By this time, there was an established ritual for the practice.

The other two priests chosen by lot that morning walked up to the temple on each side of the priest chosen to offer the incense. All three entered the holy place together. One priest set burning coals on the golden altar; the other priest arranged the incense, so it was ready to go. Then those two priests left the temple, and the incense priest was left all alone in the holy place. iv. In front of him was the golden altar of incense; it was 18 inches square and 3 feet high. On that small table lay the burning coals, with little wisps of smoke rising up, ready for the incense.

Behind the gold altar was a huge, thick curtain, and behind that curtain was the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place, where no man could enter, except the high priest, and that only on the Day of Atonement. As he faced the golden altar of incense, to his right would be the table of showbread, and to his left would be the golden lampstand, which provided the only light for the holy place.

The incense was kept burning perpetually, just in front of the veil that divided the holy place from the most holy place. The lone priest would offer the incense every morning and every evening, while the rest of the priests and worshipers stood outside the holy place in prayer (verse 10).

The book of Exodus explains that the smoke of incense burned twice a day in the temple is symbolic of the prayers of the saints. This was a sweet-smelling savor before the Lord. Special perfume was to be burned. And it must be burned in the morning and in the evening, this was Zechariah's job. This altar was before the Lord.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense: When the people outside saw the two men exit the temple, they knew that the time to offer the incense had come. Those hundreds of people bowed or kneeled before the Lord and spread their hands out in silent prayer. They knew that at that moment the incense priest prayed in the holy place, in the very presence of God, for the entire nation.

And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord: The angel simply stood on the right side of the altar of incense. Zechariah probably had his eyes tightly shut, in passionate prayer, and when he opened them, he saw this angel.

II. Destiny (Luke 1:12-16)

When Zechariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him: The angel who appeared to Zechariah was not a romantic figure, or a naked baby with wings. This angel was a glorious, fearful, and an awesome creature. Like most angels in the Bible, the first thing this angel has to say to his human contact is **“Do not be afraid.”**

Fear not, Zachariah: for thy prayer is heard: The angel's first words were of comfort. He assured Zechariah that he need not be afraid, for his prayer had been heard (v. 13). His official prayer as a priest, representing the people of Israel would be a prayer that God's kingdom would come. A prayer with which the people outside would be in agreement as they prayed. Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child in the past, but now that its fulfillment seemed impossible, he probably had given up all hope, and he may have no longer made this request.

thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son: Sometimes we pray for something for a long, long time. We pray for the salvation of a spouse or a child. We pray for a calling or a ministry. We pray that God would bring that special person to us. But after years of heartfelt prayer, we give up out of discouragement. Zechariah and Elizabeth probably prayed years of passionate prayer for a son, but gave up a long time ago, and stopped believing God for so much anymore.

When we are in that place, we sometimes begin – in the smallest of ways – to doubt the love and care of God for us. But God always loves, and His care never stops.

Zechariah' reaction to the angel's promise was probably thinking, "I don't know what you are talking about. I didn't pray for a son. We're old, you know. I gave up on that prayer a long time ago. I'm praying for the salvation of Israel. I'm praying that God will send the promised Messiah." Zechariah didn't know that God would answer both prayers at once and use his miracle baby to be a part of sending the Messiah!

iv. Zechariah had no idea that God would answer the two greatest desires of his heart at once. He had probably completely given up on the idea of being a dad; it was a hope that was crushed over the years of disappointment. But God hadn't given up on it, even though Zechariah and Elizabeth had.

You shall call his name John: The boy was given a name before he was even conceived. This was a command from the Lord to name the boy **John**. John means Jehovah has shown grace.

And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth: Joy and gladness are the hallmarks of the messianic kingdom (Isaiah 25:9; Psalms 14:7; 48:11). Gabriel explains how John will bring joy to Zechariah and many other people in the future when he prepares people for the Lord (the Messiah).

For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord: This is a chosen vessel, born into the world for a purpose. God allowed John to come into this family because of their great devotion to God. John, as the angel's words make clear, was to be the fulfillment of Malachi's final prophecy (Malachi 3:5-6).

He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink: This is probably a reference to the vow of a Nazirite found in Numbers 6. Their son John would be specially consecrated to God all the days of his life, as Samson *should* have been.

He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb: Their son John would have a unique filling of the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Holy Spirit even while in the womb.

And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God: When John went through the country preaching, "repent and be baptized", many of the children of Israel did just that. John would be a voice crying in the wilderness that the Lord is coming.

III. Doubt (Luke 1:17-20)

And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah: John's great work would be to prepare the way of the Messiah by turning hearts to God before the Messiah came. The pattern for his ministry would be the great prophet Elijah – in the spirit and power of Elijah. Elijah, like John the Baptist, was known for his bold, uncompromising stand for the Word of God, even in the face of a ruthless monarch (1 Kings 18:17-24; Mark 6:15). Jesus later said this was fulfilled in John (Matthew 11:14 and 17:12).

to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children: This quotation from Malachi 4:5-6 is meaningful for more than its reference to Elijah. These were essentially the last words in the Old Testament, and now God's revelation is resuming where it had left off.

And Zechariah said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this?: In spite of Zechariah's godliness, his obedience to the Law, and his lifetime of ministry, his faith was weak when it came to believing such a marvelous promise. There in the shadow of this angel's splendor, Zechariah made a request of the angel, that he provide some sign, which would assure him that this promise would be fulfilled.

It isn't that Zechariah doesn't *want* to believe this; he does. It is simply that he feels it must be too good to be true, and he has probably protected himself from disappointment by not setting his expectations too high. We rob ourselves of many a miracle by the same attitude.

Zechariah looked at the circumstances first, and what God can do last; we are tempted to think this is logical; but if God is real, there is nothing logical about putting circumstances before God.

The sad thing about the unbelief of Zechariah is that there were a number of examples of supernatural births in the Old Testament. God was not promising to do something for Zechariah and Elizabeth which he had not done for others before them. Abraham and Sarah had a son in their old age, as did Hannah and the parents of Samson. The virgin birth, on the other hand, was something entirely new, but Zechariah was not asked to believe this, only that he and his wife would have a son in their old age.

And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God: Gabriel reminds Zechariah of who *he is* and where he has come from. Gabriel is saying, "Good grief, man, do you not know who is telling you that you and your wife will have a son? I am Gabriel, the angel who stands in God's presence. When I speak, I speak for God. To disbelieve my words is to doubt God Himself."

And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed: With this rebuke, Zechariah was struck dumb. He was given a sign, or should I say he himself became a sign, and in fact the sign was indicated by his speaking in "sign" language (1:22).

Zechariah paid a price for his unbelief. His unbelief did not make God take his promise back; it just kept Zechariah from enjoying it.

When we do not believe God's promise for our lives, we do not necessarily destroy the promise; but we do destroy our ability to enjoy the promise. What made this such a severe punishment was that Zechariah had such great news to tell.

Conclusion

The aged priest Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth were both believers. In this dark time of Israel's history, when most within the realm of the church no longer were true believers, this man and his wife yet looked for redemption in Israel. They still waited in faith for the coming Messiah. Zechariah was himself faithful in his labors in the temple as priest. He understood the meaning of the sacrifices made in the temple. His particular task, at this time, however, was not to offer sacrifices to offer incense to the Lord.

He was a believer. He believed the Messiah was coming to save Israel. But he failed to realize that this salvation was going to be the wonder of all wonders. That work of God in our salvation started with the very conception of this forerunner to Christ. Zechariah at this point stumbled in unbelief at the announcement of this salvation.

Notice his words to the angel in verse 18 once again: "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." It was not that he asked this of the angel because he believed and simply wanted confirmation. The angel tells Zechariah that Zechariah "believed not his words." This was an act of unbelief. Zechariah, in hope, looked for and believed in the salvation that would come with the Messiah, but at this moment when his faith should have lived, Zechariah stumbled. He became guilty of unbelief. He faltered and failed. Take note of that, dear listener. It may be true, on the one hand, that God grafts His people into Christ by a true and living faith. But faith comes to fruition in the lives of God's saints by their knowing and trusting God and His Son Jesus Christ. In other words, it is not a question as to whether Zechariah was a believer. He was. But at this point Zechariah was not acting in faith. He did not place his trust in God, that God would indeed fulfill what He had spoken.

Compare Zechariah to Abraham when God told Abraham to offer up Isaac, his only son. Abraham could have reasoned that God was requiring something of him that was unreasonable and even downright wrong. But he did not. Abraham believed that even if he took Isaac's life, God would be able to raise Isaac up again. Abraham's faith was tested and he walked in that faith. Zechariah's faith was now put to the test too, with something as simple as believing the good news that he was going to have a son. But Zechariah was not trusting that God could do what He promised. Zechariah doubted it. And that was an act of unbelief.

Yet, at the same time we ought not to judge Zechariah too harshly, should we. We who are God's people saved in Christ are given faith too. God has grafted us into Jesus Christ by a true and living faith. We are one with Him. Because this is true, we also are given to know and trust in God and His Son. We know that God is our God and that He will always bless us as His people, no matter what befalls us. We know that, but how often when God tries us, puts our faith to the test, we too can falter and stumble? We know God is our Father who loves us and who therefore sends us everything in this life for our good. But how many times, when problems arise in our lives, we can be like Zechariah and forget about the blessings of the gospel. We forget about the promises of God, the glad tidings that we belong to Christ and that nothing will separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. We then doubt and fear rather than trusting in our faithful God and Father. Are we like Zechariah? We must believe when God puts our faith to the test. We must trust God. He will make everything turn out to our advantage in

life. We can learn that from this account before us today. Zechariah faltered, and in doubt he asked the angel for a sign.

So, a sign is given to Zechariah. He was unable to speak, much less sing of the wonderful gift that God had given to him. The praises of his mouth were withheld. As soon as his tongue was loosed after John's birth, those praises poured out of his heart and mouth. But until then he had to hold them all up inside of himself.

We can rejoice that God has not held our tongues silent. We are able to speak and, yes, also to sing the praises of God. He has performed His work of salvation in the birth of Christ. He has delivered us from sin and adopted us into His family. He has in His grace made salvation possible for us in Christ. Now, we come before God—no matter what difficulties we may face in life—and we rejoice in the living God. We speak of His grace to us in every circumstance of life. We live in the consciousness that God saves us unto Himself in all things.

Throughout the ages God's people have been called to live by faith. There can be no doubt that this gift of faith is given and preserved by God Himself. Nevertheless, we are called to live in that faith. We are called as God's people to cling to the promises given us in the gospel. We must embrace them to ourselves even when certain events of life are troublesome and seem to indicate that God is not blessing us. We must believe that God is our God, and that He saves us even when troubles in life make things dark and rocky for us. Such is faith. It is worked in us and preserved by God. But it also is an activity that we must exercise in this life. We must believe! Yet, even though we are those in whom God works faith, we are still often characterized by moments of unbelief. How often we pray with the father out of whose son Jesus cast a devil, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief!" The account before us in today's lesson highlights that truth for us too.