

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

Luke 1:5-25

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Scripture

Today I am continuing my series in the Gospel of Luke that I am calling, “To Seek and to Save the Lost.” The primary mission of Jesus, which Luke captures so well in Luke 19:10 is “to seek and to save the lost.”

I love the way *The ESV Study Bible* captures Jesus’ mission, which is noted in the introduction to Luke’s Gospel:

The Gospel of Luke finds its fundamental unity in the person of Jesus Christ and in his mission to seek and to save the lost. From the first announcement of his coming to his ascension into heaven, Jesus is at the center of everything: the songs are for his praise, the miracles are by his power, the teaching is from his wisdom, the conflict is over his claims, and the cross is that which only he could bear.¹

Before Luke tells us about the announcement of Jesus’ coming to earth, he tells us about another announcement. It is the announcement in which the birth of John the Baptist—Jesus’ cousin—is foretold. John the Baptist is Jesus’ forerunner. He is the one whom God sent to prepare the world for Jesus.

Let us read about it in Luke 1:5-25:

⁵In the days of Herod, king of Judea, 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. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God

¹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1938.

when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 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. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And 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 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (Luke 1:5-25)

Introduction

Earlier this week it was reported that an ancient fragment, about the size of a business card, had been discovered. On the parchment were four words that suggest that early Christians believed that Jesus had been married. Written in a language of ancient Egyptian Christians, the four words translate as, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife.'"²

Much has been made of this discovery, and many people are abuzz about the possibility of Jesus being married. The fact is that Jesus is married; his bride is the Church! However, Jesus was not married to a woman.

The reason people get carried away with discoveries like this is because they do not know God's word. And, if they do know God's word, they don't always trust God's word.

However, not trusting God's word is not only a modern problem. God's people throughout the ages have had difficulty trusting God's word.

Luke begins his Gospel with an account of a person who had difficulty trusting God's word. In the account of the promise of the birth of John the Baptist, Luke tells us how we should respond to God's word.

Lesson

An analysis of the account regarding the promise of the birth of John the Baptist as set forth in Luke 1:5-25 will show us how to respond to God's word.

Let's conduct the analysis by looking at the following:

1. The Childless Couple (1:5-7)
2. The Angelic Visitor (1:8-12)
3. The Promised Son (1:13-17)

² See <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2012/09/18/harvard-scholar-discovery-suggests-jesus-had-wife/>.

4. The Unbelieving Father (1:18-23)
5. The Believing Mother (1:24-25)

I. The Childless Couple (1:5-7)

First, let's begin by looking at the childless couple.

As a good historian, Luke began by noting that the account he was about to narrate took place **in the days of Herod, king of Judea** (1:5a). He reigned from 37 to 4 BC, and it was a time of oppression for the people of God.

During these difficult times, **there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah** (1:5b). King David organized the priesthood into twenty-four divisions (1 Chronicles 24:4-19), the eighth of which was that of **Abijah** (v. 10). But, after the Babylonian Captivity, only four of the twenty-four divisions returned to Judah (Ezra 2:36-38). The Jews, however, still wanted twenty-four divisions. So the leaders divided the remaining four divisions back into twenty-four divisions, and restored their former names to them. So, **Zechariah**, while he was a descendant of Aaron, was probably not in the family line of **Abijah** (since Abijah was one of the divisions that did not return after the exile); nevertheless, he served in the division that bore the name of **Abijah**.

Priests were expected to marry an Israelite woman who was a virgin (cf. Leviticus 21:7, 14; Ezekiel 44:22). **Zechariah** was doubly blessed, however, because **he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth** (1:5c).

Zechariah and Elizabeth were a remarkable couple, well suited to be the parents of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. In a very difficult time in the history of God's people we learn that **"they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord"** (1:6). This godly couple was a shining example of godliness in the midst of an unfaithful people. They were declared

righteous by virtue of their trust in God and his word, and they walked in obedience to the Lord.

There was only one cloud that cast a shadow on their happiness. Luke succinctly stated their problem, **“But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years”** (1:7).

One can imagine Elizabeth’s heartache. Any woman who has ever wanted a child knows what Elizabeth must have endured: the prying questions, the thoughtless comments, and the accusatory suggestions that she must be at fault. In that ancient culture barrenness was considered a disgrace, even a punishment. God had told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 2:28). And Solomon noted, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Psalm 127:3).

But Elizabeth was not at fault. God was not punishing her with barrenness because of some sin. Luke had just noted that she was not only **righteous before God**, but that she walked **blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord**.

You see, our sins are not always the cause of our suffering. Sometimes they are, but not always.

Sometimes God allows the consequences of our sins to run their course. But he does so to discipline us as an act of his love. Sometimes God does discipline us for our sin, as he did in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

But not all suffering is the consequence of our sin. Suffering is at least the consequence of living in a fallen world. The results of Adam’s sin have had and will continue to have a ripple effect until the return of Jesus.

The fact is that we don’t always know why God permits suffering. We must therefore be very careful not to reach the wrong conclusion about why someone is suffering.

In the case of Elizabeth, she was barren for the glory of

God. God was not punishing her because of something that she had done. No. God was planning a wonderful miracle that would get his people ready for the arrival of the Savior. And one of the amazing ways that God would show his sovereign power was to enable a woman **advanced in years**, well beyond menopause, to conceive and bear a child.

Part of the Christian perspective on suffering is that even in suffering, there is a way for us to glorify God. One sees this very clearly in Christians who live in countries where they are persecuted for their faith. The question you and I must ask when suffering comes our way is not, “What have I done to deserve this?” but rather, “How can I glorify God through this?”

Elizabeth is a great example of this. As a young married woman, she did not understand why she was not able to conceive a child. As the months turned into years, and the years turned into decades, she was undoubtedly disappointed. But she did not let her life revolve around her disappointment. Instead, she busied herself in faithful service to the Lord, **walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord**. Rather than focusing on her disappointment, she focused on glorifying God in her life.

So, when trial or difficulty or suffering comes our way, let us live in such a way that we continue to glorify God.

II. The Angelic Visitor (1:8-12)

Second, notice the angelic visitor.

Luke said in verse 8, “**Now while he** [that is, Zechariah] **was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty.**” Five times a year Zechariah left home to serve for a week at the temple in Jerusalem. Three of those weeks were for the three major Jewish Festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles, when all priestly divisions served at the temple as religious visitors swelled Jerusalem’s population by several

hundred thousand people. In addition, each priestly division also served two one-week long periods a year when they carried out the daily temple sacrifices and services.

Now, we don't know exactly when Zechariah was serving at the temple in Jerusalem, but it was probably not during one of the major Festivals. Luke noted that **"according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense"** (1:9). Special services were assigned **by lot**. This was to ensure that a priest had at least one opportunity in his lifetime **to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense**. Once a priest had been chosen to perform the special service, he was no longer eligible to do so again. With approximately 18,000 priests living in Judea at the time, and with special services being performed twice a day (in the morning and in the evening), it would take almost 25 years for each priest to get a turn. And since priests served only for 20 years, from the age of thirty to fifty (Numbers 4:3), there was a good chance that some priests would never perform a special service. So, being **chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense** was a once-in-a-lifetime highlight in the career of every priest.

Picture the scene. Zechariah was rehearsing in his mind what he needed to do when he got into the Holy Place. With sweaty palms and a racing heart, he went into the vestment room. He put on the robes that priests wore when they went into the Holy Place in the temple. Then he walked through the temple courtyards, passing through the growing crowd of people who were gathering for the evening prayer. Then he slowly walked up the stairs that led into the Holy Place where God was. As he opened the door and went into the Holy Place, he saw the sacred furniture that God's people had made according to the instructions that God gave Moses centuries earlier. On his left was the golden lampstand, candles lighting the cavernous room. On his right was the table for the bread. And ahead

of him, right in front of the curtain that guarded the entrance to the Holy of Holies (which the High Priest entered only once a year, on the Day of Atonement), was the golden altar of incense.

Zechariah walked slowly to the altar of incense. His heart was pounding, as he was acutely aware that he was in the very presence of almighty God. He poured the incense from his flask onto altar of incense. The incense wafted up afresh as he offered up his prayer to God. **“And,”** Luke wrote, **“the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense”** (1:10). Zechariah was deeply engaged in a ministry that was granted to very few people.

It is hard to know exactly what Zechariah prayed. Undoubtedly, he prayed for the salvation of the people of God. His people, who were under the brutal yoke of Roman oppression, were waiting for God’s ancient promise to send a deliverer to be fulfilled, and for God to come and save his people. Zechariah was asking God to fulfill his promise.

But, Zechariah also prayed for a son. For decades he and Elizabeth had been praying for God to grant them a child. They knew that humanly speaking, it was impossible for them to have a child. But, he was, after all, praying to God, the almighty, sovereign creator of the entire universe. With God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

Suddenly, Zechariah sensed that something was different. As he looked, he almost collapsed with terror. Luke wrote in verses 11-12, **“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.”** The angelic visitor scared Zechariah half to death.

That is what happens when people see angels—the glorious, supernatural creatures that God created to worship and serve him. Because angels live in the very presence of God, they reflect his glory, which is far more than fallen men and women

can bear. So, on those rare occasions when people see angels, they always respond with terror.

III. The Promised Son (1:13-17)

Third, let's look at the promised son.

The angel said to the petrified priest, **“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”** (1:13).

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for decades for a child. Finally, God answered their prayer!

It is true that every prayer we offer to God is always answered. Usually, God's answers are either *yes*, *no*, or *not yet*. Obviously, when God says *yes* to our prayer, we have our prayer answered positively. That is a quick answer to our prayer.

However, when God says *no* or *not yet*, that is much harder for us to discern. Is God saying *no* to our prayer? Or is he saying *not yet* to our prayer? How do we discern the difference between the two?

It seems to me that if we pray for something that is clearly contrary to God's word, the answer will be *no*. But sometimes, we pray for something that is not contrary to God's word. Occasionally, we may get a very definite sense that God is saying *no* to our prayer. It is clear to us that the answer is *no*, and so there is no longer any need to pray further about it.

But, if we do not get a sense that God is saying *no* to our prayer, it could be that he is saying *not yet*. In those instances we are encouraged to keep praying. And although God may sometimes answer our prayers, as he did in the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah, I must caution us to keep in mind that he may not always do so.

The angel said that Zechariah's prayer for a son would be answered. But, in addition, his prayer for the salvation of the

people of God would also be answered! The angel said in verses 14-17:

¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

With these words, the angel began to explain the significance of John the Baptist. He would be no ordinary child. The birth of the child would bring **joy and gladness**, not only to his parents, but also to many.

Joy is a significant theme in Luke's Gospel, and this is the first statement of **joy** in the Gospel.

John would also **be great before the Lord**. In fact, Jesus said of his cousin John, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11).

Moreover, John was the promised messenger that had been promised four hundred years earlier, the last time that God had spoken to his people. God said through the prophet Malachi, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (3:1). **In the spirit and power of Elijah**, John would **make ready for the Lord a people prepared**. He would preach a message of repentance that would turn people away from their sinful ways.

IV. The Unbelieving Father (1:18-23)

Fourth, observe the unbelieving father.

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (1:18).

Rather than believe the angel, **Zechariah** doubted the word of the angel.

As one commentator said, “The objection Zechariah raised is the objection that people always raise: he did not believe in the supernatural power of God. He was looking at things from the merely human point of view. He had his biology right, but not his theology.”³

According to John Chrysostom, the famous preacher from ancient Constantinople, “Zechariah looked at his age, his gray hair, his body that had lost its strength. He looked at his wife’s sterility, and he refused to accept on faith what the angel revealed would come to pass.”⁴

This is where people always struggle. They believe that the Bible was written by men, but they doubt that it was written by God. They believe that Jesus was a man, but they doubt that he was also God. They believe that Jesus died, but they doubt that he rose again.

It takes faith to accept God’s word, to receive God’s Son, and to enter God’s salvation—faith in an all-powerful God.

Zechariah could not believe what the angel had just told him. The irony is that he prayed for the very thing that he ended up doubting that God could do! Sometimes even godly people have trouble believing the power of God.

And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2009), 24.

⁴ John Chrysostom, “On the Incomprehensible Nature of God” (2.11), quoted in *Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just Jr., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 11.

place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (1:19-20). Zechariah was chastised for his doubt. He would eventually believe. But, until the time of the birth of John, he would have to suffer in silence.

Apparently, the encounter with the angel took quite a while. We can understand how Zechariah would be totally overwhelmed by the angel, the news, and now his muteness.

Luke said, **“And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And 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”(1:21-22).**

Poor Zechariah! For more than four hundred years God had not said anything to his people. Now, Zechariah had just received the most fantastic news that had been heard in four hundred years and he could not share it with the people.

God was teaching Zechariah to trust him and his word. Zechariah doubted the word of God through the angel. He wanted a sign. And so God gave him a sign: he shut his mouth! In effect, God was saying, “You want a sign, Zechariah? I will give you a sign. You should take me at my word. You should trust me and my word as it came to you through my messenger. But, if you won’t believe my good news, my gospel, then I will not let you share it!”

Luke has written about Zechariah’s doubt so that we will not make the same mistake. Luke wants people to be certain about the good news of the gospel. And he wants us to take God at his word so that we can share this good news with others in our circle of contacts.

Rather anti-climatically, Luke ends the account of Zechariah’s service by stating in verse 23, **“And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.”**

V. The Believing Mother (1:24-25)

Finally, notice the believing mother.

Imagine what happened when Zechariah arrived home. Clearly, he was unable to speak. He was mute. However, Luke said, **“After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived”** (1:24a).

Interestingly, Luke noted that **“for five months she kept herself hidden”** (1:24b). Why was that? Luke did not say why Elizabeth kept herself hidden. Perhaps people were ridiculing her more than ever now that Zechariah was mute and unable to speak. Whatever the reason, she went into seclusion for five months.

But, we notice that she believed what God said. She said in verse 25, **“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”** It is typical of Luke to comment what the good news meant for hurting people. Here he shows what the good news meant for Elizabeth. The good news is for the nations, but it was also for people like her—a woman upon whom God looked with grace. Her prayers were answered. Her reproach had ended. Unlike Zechariah she believed what God said. She trusted his word.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the account regarding the promise of the birth of John the Baptist as set forth in Luke 1:5-25, we should not doubt but trust God’s word.

This is what God has always wanted from people: trust. God wants us to take him at his word. God wants us to trust him. God does not want us to doubt him. God disciplined Zechariah for doubting his word.

God said that Jesus died and rose again, so believe in the

crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

God said that he will forgive anyone who comes to him trusting in Jesus for salvation, so believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness of your sins.

God said that he will never leave or forsake you, so believe that God is with you no matter what trials or difficulties you are going through.

God said that he will send Jesus again to judge the world, so get ready for the return of Jesus by trusting in him alone as he is offered in the gospel for salvation. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Almighty God, forgive us when we doubt you and your word. Enable us to respond to you and your word in faith. Help us to trust you, especially when we are going through difficult times.

And for all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go into the world trusting God and his word!