



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI † DEO † GLORIA

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Sermon Notes

The Promise of John the Baptist

Luke 1:5-13

April 10, 2011

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ 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.'

- The Book of Malachi records the final prophecy in all of the Old Testament. It reads:

⁵Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”
Malachi 4:5-6

- With these words, the Old Testament ends, and the LORD chooses not to speak to his people through a prophet for 400 years.
- And so, with the dawning of the first century in Israel, we find a people who have not heard anew from the Lord for centuries.
 - Yet, as a nation, they had all but turned from the truth contained in the Old Testament.

- The Pharisees, with their self-righteous legalism, and the Sadducees, with their thirst for position, wealth, and power, had tremendous control over Jerusalem in the first century.
- Not only this, but Rome occupied Judea during this time as well. Evidence of the pagan/gentile occupation was everywhere in the city of Jerusalem as soldiers walked the street day and night.
- **Consequently, as we read the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, we must understand the “hopeless” situation in which we find the people. Not only do we read of a couple who is barren, but an entire nation as well.**

I.	A Helpless Situation
II.	A Faithful Remnant
III.	A Promise of Hope

I. A Helpless Situation

- Luke begins this birth narrative by providing the reader with a historical context: “In the time of Herod king of Judea.”
- This places the subsequent events in the context of Palestinian/Ancient Israeli history. Herod the Great reigned as a Jewish king for Rome from 37-4 B.C. Technically, he was not a Jew by birth, but a descendant of the hated Edomites, and a member of the Idumean [descendants of Esau] dynasty. Herod was a corrupt leader and despised by the Jews
 - Herod was commissioned by Mark Antony and Octavian with the Roman Senate’s confirmation in 40 B.C.; however, he did not begin his rule until 37 B.C., after driving out the Parthians (with the help of the Romans) from Palestine.
 - At this time, Herod’s “kingdom” in “Judea” included not only Judea proper, but Galilee, much of Perea, and even north into much of Syria.
 - The events of Luke 1 take place near the end of Herod’s reign. The reason we are confident of this is because Matthew 2 states that Christ was born sometime near the time of Herod’s death.

Eduard Schwizer in *The Good News According to Luke* states that Herod wanted to see himself as the Davidic king; however “the one who would get that designation was born in his reign” in a small and obscure Israelite village. Herod’s reaction to the news from the magi in Matthew 2 seems to confirm this was, indeed, Herod’s view.

- There appears to be little doubt of Herod's cruelty. Of course, we read in Matthew 2:16-18 of his murdering of innocent boys. We also read historically that he murdered his wife, Mariamne, her brother, her mother, and several of his own sons.

Therefore, as we read the account of John the Baptist's birth, we find a people who are truly in a helpless and desperate state. Not only have they not heard from the LORD in 400 years, they are occupied by a Roman / pagan kingdom, and the "Jewish" leader in the land is a cruel tyrant.

- But, then we read, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, **there was a priest named Zechariah...**"
 - The meaning of Zechariah's name is, "Yahweh has remembered again," and is rather appropriate in this context.
- Luke describes Zechariah as "a priest...who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah..."
 - As a priest, he would have served in the Temple for two one-week periods every year. This did not include holy-days, such as Yom Kippur or the Feast of Tabernacles.
 - According to the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, there were twenty-four divisions of the Hebrew priesthood during the first century. Each division was subdivided into orders, and each order served a daily rotation during its week of service at the Temple.
 - Each rotation involved four to nine priestly houses or families.
 - Luke states that Zechariah was of the "...priestly division of Abijah..."
 - In 1 Chronicles 24:10, the order of Abijah (also known as Abia) appears eighth on the list.
 - By the first century, the order had a rather wicked reputation; however, clearly Zechariah was an exception to this.
- Interestingly, Luke describes Elizabeth as "also a descendent of Aaron."
 - This meant that Elizabeth also was of a priestly lineage and heritage.
 - In Ancient Israel, it was a common practice for a Jewish priest to take a priestly wife. In fact, in Leviticus 21:7, 14, we read of the marital restrictions for priests:

⁷ They [priests] shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God...
¹⁴ A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people,”

- It was, therefore, viewed quite favorably for a priest to marry a woman of priestly heritage.

Darrell Bock comments, “The mention of Elizabeth’s lineage underlines her pious origins and strengths the pedigree behind John the Baptist... The parents of John the Baptist are of the best spiritual ancestry.”

BARRENNESS

- Then, Luke states, “**But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.**”
 - Old Testament parallels existed to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s condition:
 - Isaac born to Sarah (Genesis 18:11)
 - Samson born to the wife of Manoah (Judges 13:2,5)
 - Samuel born to Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2)
 - Barrenness was viewed in Ancient Israel as a curse from God (Leviticus 20:20-21; Jeremiah 22:30; 1 Samuel 1:5-6; 2 Samuel 6:23).

²⁰ If a man lies with his uncle’s wife, he has uncovered his uncle’s nakedness; they shall bear their sin; they shall die childless. ²¹ If a man takes his brother’s wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother’s nakedness; they shall be childless.” Leviticus 20:20-21

- We also read in the Old Testament of individuals like Michal, David’s wife, who, as a result of God’s judgment, never had children.
- Yet, just because Elizabeth was barren does not mean she was under God’s judgment.
 - Today, we often speak stand in judgment of people, like first century Jews, who viewed one’s hopeless situation as a direct result of *something they did*.
 - Yet, **we do the same thing today**. The difference is that we view one’s success as a result of God’s blessing, as if something a wealthy or successful person did resulted in “financial blessings.”

Yet, we must never forget that one of God’s greatest blessings is the “gift” of suffering. For it is in the midst of this suffering that we understand our complete and full dependence upon God.

The barrenness of Elizabeth, although real, was a symbol of the spiritual barrenness of Israel.

- Although it is speculative, one could imagine that much of the spiritual estate of Zechariah and Elizabeth [their righteous lives] was due to their barren state, for no doubt they spent a great deal of time in prayer and supplication before the LORD.
- Not only were Zechariah and Elizabeth barren, but they were advanced in years, providing a parallel with Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac.
- This was, indeed, by the world’s measures, a helpless estate.

II. A Faithful Remnant

- Yet, Luke makes it clear that not only do Zechariah and Elizabeth both have proper backgrounds (both possessing a priestly heritage), but, in Verse 6, **“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.”**
 - The words of Luke which described Zechariah and Elizabeth place them in direct contrast with the Pharisees. Luke’s point is clear: they were righteous *in the sight of God* [as opposed to *in the sight of men* like the Pharisees].
 - These two individuals had placed their faith in the living God of Israel (Acts 24:14). No doubt, they believed the Word of the LORD was right and true (Psalm 19:7-8).

John MacArthur writes, “That Zechariah and Elizabeth lived blamelessly before the Lord does not mean they were sinless, but rather that their lives were characterized by obedience to God’s law (Deut. 30:8-10; Joshua 1:8).

Leon Morris agrees, “This means, of course, that they served God faithfully, not that they were sinless.”

- They were like Job, who “was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:1).

Darrel Bock writes, “The righteousness described here fits its pre-cross setting; it is righteousness from the perspective of God’s law. In contrast to Pauline justification, righteousness here is concrete and visible and is seen in consistent acts...The wording also has Old Testament parallels.”

- Read Genesis 6:8; 7:1; Ezekiel 14:14; Deuteronomy 28:9; 1 Samuel 8:3, 5; 1 Kings 3:14; Isaiah 33:15; Proverbs 28:18.

III. A Promise of Hope

- Luke informs us that Zechariah’s division was on duty.

“Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty...”

- He was in the midst of his twice a year temple ministry, as one of the approximately 18,000 priests serving in the Temple complex.
 - Zechariah was in the midst of performing the greatest act of his entire priestly career – this was, indeed, the high point of his life as a priest.
 - It was the proper custom among the priests to cast lots in order to determine which of the multiple priests would be chosen to offer the incense along with the whole burnt offering.
 - This custom occurred two times each day – once at dawn and once at dusk. Typically, a priest would only be chosen once in his entire lifetime (given the large number of priests available), but it was also common that a particular priest would never have the opportunity and privilege to offer the incense during his lifetime.
- Luke makes it clear; however, that **this was Zechariah’s time. He was chosen by lots.**

“⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.”

- During the first century, the evening sacrifice would occur at around 3:30 p.m. and, and it was referred to as the “perpetual offering” [Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:3-8]. The preparation for this offering occurred beginning at around 2:30 p.m.
 - After about an hour of preparation, the priests would conduct the evening sacrifice, which would also coincide with the evening prayers of the people. These were often well attended (Daniel 9:21; Acts 3:1), and given Luke’s emphasis on the prayers of the

people (**verse 10**), Zechariah's particular offering here in Luke 1 may very well have been the evening sacrifice.

- Once chosen by lots, Zechariah would have gone into the Holy Place, along with several other priests. The Holy Place was the location of the altar of incense, the lampstand, and the table of showbread.
 - However, the other priests would soon exit the Holy Place, leaving Zechariah as the only priest in that area of the Temple.
 - At this time, Zechariah would offer incense, with its “sweet savor,” to the LORD on behalf of the people, and in preparation for the sacrificial offering [Exodus 30:1-9].
- The incense symbolized intercession for the people of Israel, making its way to the face of God.

It was in the midst of his faithful service to the LORD and His people, by offering incense before the Lord in accordance with His commands, that God makes an incredible announcement for the priest, his wife, and the entire Hebrew nation.

- In Verse 10, Luke emphasizes that fact that “the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.” It is interesting that Luke emphasizes the importance of prayer throughout his Gospel [Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 18:1-8; 22:41].
 - **It is at this time – during a moment of prayer – that the LORD acts on behalf of His priest and His people.**
 - A later tradition [from Tg. Song 4:16] states that the people were praying, “May the merciful God enter the Holy Place and accept with favor the offering of his people.”
 - Regardless of what the people were saying, the importance is that they were praying. And it was in the midst of this prayerful worship that God sends the angel Gabriel (1:19).
- Luke writes, “**And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.**”
 - The angel appears to Zechariah on the side of *strength* and *favor* [Psalm 110:1; Mark 16:5].
 - Given Luke's description, the angel appears between the altar of incense and the candlestick (menorah) in the Holy Place.

- Gabriel’s announcement places Zechariah and Elizabeth in the Old Testament tradition of announcements of the births of Ishmael (Genesis 16:10-11 where Ishmael is announced to Hagar), Isaac (Genesis 17:15-19 where Isaac announced to Abraham and Genesis 18:10-15 where Isaac is announced to both parents), Jacob, Esau (Genesis 25:23 where Jacob and Esau are announced to Rebekah), and Samson (Judges 13:3-21 where Samson is announced to the wife of Manoah).
- Luke writes, **“And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.”**
 - The Greek word here for “fear” is *phobos*, where we get the word “phobia.”
 - The usage here implies that Zechariah was completely terrified. Not only was the angel’s visit completely unexpected, but encounters with divine messengers or agents in Scripture are often coupled with such fear (Exodus 15:16; Judges 6:22-23; 13:6, 22; 2 Samuel 6:9; Isaiah 6:5; Daniel 8:16-17; 10:10-11).
 - Not only in these records though, but Luke himself often records the fearful response of people to angelic or divine messengers (Luke 1:29-30, 65; 2:9; 5:8-10; 9:34; Acts 5:5, 11).
 - Luke’s point is clear: Zechariah is not merely startled, he is terrified.
 - The appearance of the angel Gabriel only serves to heighten the tension and drama leading up to not only the birth of John the Baptist, but ultimately to the birth of Jesus.
- Finally, Luke writes, in Verse 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.’”**
 - The angel clearly provides Zechariah with the reason why he should not fear: his prayer has been answered.
 - Note the irony here: Zechariah earnestly prays for a son, and when his prayer is answered, he is terrified!

- However, many have asked the question: **What is the prayer that God has answered?**
 - **That is, was God answering Zechariah’s (and Elizabeth’s) prayer for a son?**
 - **Or, was God answering Zechariah’s prayer (as priest) for the nation of Israel?**
- Most certainly, it was both. God was answering the prayers of a faithful, yet barren couple. But, God was also answering the prayers of a barren people. God would use the first answer to answer the second.

God cares about each of His children, individually. Yet, so often when God answers our individual prayers, they are in the context of a much greater need.

• Our own salvation is one of the best examples. Each of us are individually saved through the work of Jesus Christ. However, Christ is the Savior of not just individuals, but an entire nation...a people.

- Luke writes that the angel said to Zechariah, “...**your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.**”
 - It was the normal practice in the Ancient Near East that the father name a child. We see this in Luke 1:62. However, in this case – the case of John the Baptist – God names him, thus indicating the importance of the child in God’s redemptive plan (Genesis 16:11; 1 Kings 13:2; Isaiah 7:14).
 - Although Luke does not explain the meaning of John’s name, in the Hebrew it means “God has been gracious.”

- The announcement of John the Baptist’s birth teaches us several great truths:
 - First, it is often darkest before the dawn. This was a seemingly helpless situation:
 - God seemed silent.
 - The nation was occupied by the Romans.
 - The leadership had drifted into apostasy.
 - The “king” was a tyrant.
 - The nation was “barren.”
 - A righteous couple was “barren.”
 - The righteous couple was “advanced in years.”

Yet, as God had promised, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”
Isaiah 9:2

- Secondly, God **would** fulfill his promise of Malachi, that a forerunner would come. And this forerunner was John the Baptist.
- Thirdly, the birth announcement of John the Baptist represents the truth that God heard the prayers of the faithful, and He answered (He, indeed, does so today).
- Fourthly, the people would now have hope that Messiah would come, as John the Baptist would pave the way as the forerunner.
- **Finally, the miraculous birth of John the Baptist would lead to an even greater announcement and greater miracle: the Virgin Birth of the Son of God and the Son of Man – the Davidic Messiah, Jesus Christ.**