

## A Tale of Two Birth Announcements

Luke 1:5-38

Intro: We love to announce the births of babies, don't we? Often, we want people to know we were the first to know. This morning we are looking at the announcements of births of two baby boys in our text and the announcements of these two births still have impact today. The heading over both of these birth announcements is: "*Here is God's plan to redeem His people through His promised Son—Jesus Christ*". The birth of these two babies changed the world.

When God was ready to save sinners, He did not just drop Jesus out of Heaven as an adult. No Jesus entered our world just like we do. As a helpless, dependent baby that entered this world through the birth canal of his mother. And when God was ready to announce the birth of His Son the prophet that announced Jesus birth entered the same way. So at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel that is the story of the King of the Universe, the story of the God came in human flesh are the stories of two birth announcements. The births of these two babies had been anticipated for a long time. Main point: *Faith in God really works*. Two points:

I. Luke 1:5-25: The Birth of John the Baptist: Remain Faithful to God in Times of Disappointment

II. Luke 1:26-38: The Birth of Jesus Christ: Respond Faithfully to God in Times of Confusion

### I. The Birth of John the Baptist: Remain Faithful to God in Times of Disappointment (Luke 1:5-25)

In vv. 5-25 we will look at the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. We can learn from them about how to respond with faith in God in times of disappointment. I am just going to ask questions as we move through the text to keep it simple.

#### 1. Who were John the Baptist's parents? (vv. 5-7)

One of the amazing things about the Gospels is the amount of attention given to John the Baptist. You would think that since the Gospel is about the person and work of Jesus Christ then why spend any time at all on John's life? Yet the Gospel gives significant time to John. Luke tells us an extended story on John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the unusual circumstances surrounding John's birth.

Notice how v. 5 begins, "*In the days of Herod, king of Judea there was a priest names Zechariah.*" When we first read it we may think this is just a boring piece of history but it much more. Luke was a good historian and was setting the time and tone for us. Saying "*in the days of Herod the king*" was like saying: *In the days of President Trump*. Not only would we have a time frame but if we heard someone say "*in the days of President Trump*" we would brace ourselves for a grim story.

Also, when you hear in "*the days of Herod the king*", what we need to know is that Herod was an Idumean. He was a descendant of Esau and his family converted to Judaism before he was born. Then he married into the Hasmonean *royal family*. The Hasmoneans were descendants of the priestly line of Levi and not from the kingly line of Judah. Herod did not have a drop of Jewish blood in him nor was he from the kingly line of Judah which meant he could not legitimately call himself *King of the Jews*. Herod knew this and it was a problem for anyone who even remotely threatened his rule. This is very important because we will see Herod's paranoia come out later in the Gospel. Herod wanted to kill anyone who threatened His rule especially someone who might rightfully challenge him. This was the political and cultural context in which John the Baptist and Jesus were born.

Next Luke introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of Aaron. Aaron was the father of the priesthood and he was the brother of Moses. Their heritage goes all the way back to Genesis.

Verses 5 says Elizabeth was from the daughters of Aaron and Zechariah was from Abijah line of priests. Abijah's division of priests had served in the temple since David was king. As far as lineage goes the fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth were married to each other was a double blessing. You might say they came from the cream of the crop as far as family goes.

Verse 6 tells us that "*they were righteous before God, walking blamelessly in the commandments and statutes of the Lord.*" In other words, they loved God, loved His word, and faithfully lived according to His word. As a couple, they were committed to the Lord. It says they were *righteous before God*. Bishop J. C. Ryle says that this means the Holy Spirit was working in their lives to make them right before God and to live faithfully before Him.

They seem to have had everything going for them except for one very important thing—v. 7 tells us that they were childless. In any culture, being childless is disappointing but in ancient Hebrew culture it was a disgrace and believed to be a sign of God's punishment or disapproval.

Verse 7 says she was barren. That is a harsh term because barren is what you call a desert: dry, cracked, lifeless, worthless, and a place you do not want to be. In addition to that they were both *advanced in years*. This means they were beyond the physical ability to have children. That time had come and gone for them.

This had to be extremely difficult for both Zechariah and Elizabeth because they had been faithful to God and yet He had not blessed them with a child. What they did have was the shame and stigma of not having a child. We know Elizabeth was aware of the stigma and shame of being childless because, as we will see in v. 25, when she realizes she is pregnant she proclaims, "*Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.*"

Their faithfulness to God had not translated into blessing. This was the mentality of the culture of their day. If you are good then God will bless you and if you are not He won't. Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful to God but they did not have a child so there must be some secret sin or something that was causing God's disapproval in their lives.

You can almost feel their pain, sadness, discouragement and disappointment. Yet it is sadness mixed with faith in God and the joy of serving God in their disappointment. I am sure they remembered all of the Old Testament stories of how God gave children to their ancestors in their old age. How could they not remember Sara who was barren and it was such a disgrace to her that she had her handmaid, Hagar, bear her a child. Then there was Leah who felt the misery of barrenness for a time. Finally, there was Hannah who wept bitterly before the Lord and begged for a son until God gave her Samuel. The Old Testament saints must have been on their minds but would God provide? What was God's plan for them? While they did not know God's plan what they did know was that they should remain faithful to God during days of disappointment. They knew they were to serve Him in times of disappointment.

God had a plan for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Her barrenness was by His design and it was in order to show His glory. Her barrenness was part of the greater story of redemption that was coming through Christ. They could not see this and yet in their disappointment what we find is a couple who did not become bitter toward God because they did not have what they wanted. Instead they kept their eyes on the promises of God.

Beloved being faithful to God does not ensure you will always get what you want. It does not mean you will not be disappointed. Consider this, there are probably no more overly optimistic people than a young couple preparing for marriage. I have done many, many weddings and more than my share of premarital counseling over my 28+ years of ministry and most every couple goes into the marriage with high hopes that it is going to be amazing. They are wearing what I call *rose-colored glasses*.

Every couple has high expectations and I understand that. I had the same experience as a young man. Yet one of my jobs as a pastor is to try to remove those *rose-colored glasses* so they will be realistically optimistic.

The fact is there are going to be a lot of disappointments in marriage. When we go into marriage we have the very high expectations of what life is going to be like. Then there is reality. The difference between expectations and reality is disappointment and frustration.

Disappointments are not only limited to marriage. College students are disappointed with their grades or that they did not get into a certain class or get a certain professor or schedule.

Children are disappointed that they do not get to do everything they want to do like go to bed late and sleep late, go to school. Parents are disappointed that their kids don't go to bed early, listen to them or keep their rooms clean. Parents of adult children are disappointed about how their kids turned out or their grandkids. We are disappointed with our in-laws. We will get disappointed with our jobs, with our finances, with our body image, our physical health, our diet or some other issue.

The fact is the list of things to be disappointed about are endless. Some of these things can be very serious, painful, sad and some of them (and I dare say most of them) are minor yet when the disappointments pile up we can get depressed, sad and frustrated.

Brothers and sisters the fact is disappointments and discouragements are a part of life. We are only unfaithful to God when we give up or when we go through life complaining and groaning about God.

So how do you deal with disappointments? How can we serve God faithfully in days and seasons of disappointment? We keep turning to God. We keep pressing into life with God's people. This was what Zechariah and Elizabeth did. They stayed engaged in the life of faith with God's people. For us it means coming to church and worshipping Jesus. We get involved in a discipling relationship and share life together. We share with trusted friends who will pray for us. We share it with our small groups and ask for godly advice and ask for prayer. Perhaps we even need to seek professional counselling.

The writer of Hebrews seems to tap in to Zechariah's situation when he wrote to exhort the church to remain faithful in times of discouragement and disappointment: Hebrews 10:19-25: <sup>19</sup>*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,* <sup>20</sup>*by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,* <sup>21</sup>*and since we have a great priest over the house of God,* <sup>22</sup>*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.* <sup>23</sup>*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.* <sup>24</sup>*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,* <sup>25</sup>*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

## 2. What was Zechariah's job as a priest? (vv. 8-10)

Verses 8-10 tell us a little about Zechariah's job as a priest. I will fill in the blanks for us so we can understand how remarkable it was for him to be chosen to serve that day.

There were 24 divisions of priests and Abijah's division was 8<sup>th</sup> in the rotation to serve in the temple. These priests would perform routine duties one week every six months. Within a division of priests there were 300 priests. The priest that was chosen to serve that day was chosen by lot. *Drawing lots* was kind of like "*paper, scissors, rocks*" to see who would go into the Holy Place. Actually it was a very high honor to get to serve by going into the Holy Place. Some priests would serve their whole lives and never get this honor.

If a priest was chosen to serve he would go into the Holy Place twice a day to service the lampstands by trimming the wicks and to burn incense on the small altar by adding hot coals to it. The small altar was in front of the Holy of Holies and the burning of incense on that altar represented the prayers of God's people. It was a significant time of prayer and to be able to serve in this way meant it was no ordinary day for Zechariah.<sup>1</sup>

When it was time, Zechariah would enter the Holy Place. Step forward and poured the coals on the altar and then cover them with finely ground spices. The aroma and smoke would fill the room. It would have been a holy moment that he would never experience again so as the multitude were outside praying, Zechariah was praying and worshipping God.

Here is what I want us to take away from these verses when we consider what Zechariah was doing in his disappointment and discouragement. He may have been beyond the age to bear children but discouragement and disappointment crouched at the door of his life and seemed positioned to him.

However, what did Zechariah do? This may seem insignificant to us but it is not. Notice what he did. He kept doing the next thing he was supposed to do. He kept serving, Elizabeth kept serving. They kept meeting with God's people and most importantly they kept praying. They didn't grow hard-hearted toward God but instead kept serving God through days of disappointment. This actually is very important. It seems ordinary and in some ways it was but things are never just ordinary when God is involved and God was about to show up in an amazing way.

### 3. Gabriel announces John the Baptist's birth. (vv. 11-17)

While Zechariah was doing the ordinary things that priests do, God broke into his world. The angel Gabriel appeared to him beside the altar of incense. Zechariah was praying, the people were praying and God showed up to deliver His word through an angel.

This had to be an amazing experience. God had not spoken to His people in 400 years. There had been 400 years of silence from God and then an angel shows up and v. 12 tells us he was *troubled* and *fear fell upon him*. The word *troubled* means *troubled* but it carries with it the idea of being *confused and perplexed*. So, he was scared and did not know what was going on.

Gabriel's response to Zechariah's fear is in line with how angels had comforted the saints in the Old Testament. He said: "*Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard.*"

If you are like me you ask: *Which prayer?* The prayer for a son that you and your wife, Elizabeth had asked God to give you. Zechariah was most likely not praying for a son right at that moment but he had prayed for a son and God answered that prayer in his own time. He had probably given up on that prayer long ago and forgotten the prayer but God had not forgotten.

Look at how God answered his and Elizabeth's prayers vv. 14-17. . .

God does not forget. God does not forget the prayers of His people and He answers their prayers. He does not answer them on our timetable nor does He always answer them in the way we think they should be answered. God always does what is best for His children even when He takes us through seasons of suffering, discouragement and disappointment. He does not abandon us. He has given us grace and the means of grace to walk through these seasons. He has given us Himself in Jesus. When we pray we are to continually keep our eyes fixed on the Promise of God that is fulfilled in Christ who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. Jesus paid for our prayers by His blood because He entered the Holy of Holies by His blood.

Also we see in this text that God keeps His promises and John the Baptist's birth is a promise kept. John's birth is the keeping of the promise made in Malachi 4:5-6, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the*

<sup>1</sup> Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Luke, Vol. 1*, 20.

Lord comes. <sup>6</sup> And 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." The fulfillment of John coming as the forerunner of Jesus was a prayer answered for God's people. *God's does not forget His promises nor does He forget the prayers of His people.*

#### 4. How to NOT respond when God answers your prayer. (vv. 18-23)

Verse 18: Zechariah's response: The angel's news was just too much to take in, it was hard to believe. This was Zechariah's first mistake—unbelief.

Sometimes being educated is not a blessing. Zechariah's knowledge of life trumped his belief in the power of God. He had given up on his prayer and He had fallen into unbelief. Zechariah was still a righteous and godly man but even the faithful stumble and he stumbled in his faith. He doubted God, he did not believe his prayers nor did he believe the word of God given to him by the angel. He did not remember God-- that He is a promise keeping God.

Sometimes disappointment and discouragement cause us to doubt God. Years of trials and struggles can remove the expectation that God will work in our difficult situation. When this happens, it seems that all we can see are the obstacles. We give in to only seeing with our physical eyes instead of seeing with the eyes of our faith. Faith is the true sight that God gives His people.

Some of us here this morning have fallen into unbelief. We only see the obstacles before us. We are praying for God to save a family member, save a spouse, save a child or a co-worker and it has not happened. We are praying for God to heal a friend or family member. What you need to do is keep praying. Keep believing. Keep looking to God. He may not answer your prayer the way you want Him to but He will do what is best. Trust Him.

In vv. 19-23 we hear Gabriel's rebuke of Zechariah. When we fall into unbelief God in His mercy will rebuke us. He will discipline us. Even the godly fail and this was what happened to Zechariah. If God is disciplining you for your unbelief, be thankful for His mercy. Know that the Lord disciplines those whom He loves.

#### 5. How to respond when God answers your prayer. (vv. 24-25)

Elizabeth's response is beautiful. She had none of the background and advantages that her husband had but she, in simple faith, believed God. She was faithful to God in a very long season of disappointment. Her disappointment lasted most of her life but she kept clinging to God. She kept praying, she kept being with God's people and she kept doing the next thing in front of her.

Friend are you going through a season like this? Does it look like you may have a long season or even a life of sadness and disappointment—cling to God. Keep your eyes of your faith trained on Christ. Learn from Him, the Ultimate Man of Sorrows how to find joy. As Psalm 30:5 says, *"Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."* I do not know how long your night may last but there is joy.

## II. The Birth of Jesus Christ: Respond Faithfully to God in Times of Confusion (Luke 1:25-38)

We are now at the second birth announcement. Gabriel was a busy angel during this period. Luke's account of Gabriel's visit to Mary links the forerunner, John the Baptist, to Jesus. These stories parallel one another. The structure of the stories is similar. Luke wants us to make the connection between John and Jesus or the Old Testament and the New Testament.

He wants to make sure we understand John the Baptist is coming in the role of Elijah the prophet as the forerunner of the promised Messiah and now the Messiah is coming. All of this is to let us know that God keeps His promises and that Jesus is the Promised Savior we have been expecting since Genesis 3. He is the Seed of the woman, but who was this woman that Genesis 3 referred to?

#### 1. Who was the virgin Mary? (vv. 26-27)

The scene has moved from Jerusalem, the religious capital of Israel, to the backwater village of Nazareth. In v. 27 we meet Mary who was a virgin. Verse 27 tells us twice that she was a virgin. Luke wants to make sure we make the Isaiah 7:14 connection, which says, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."*

Mary was also *betrothed* to Joseph who was from the house of King David. The promise in Isaiah 7:14 was a Davidic promise and now another piece of the promise comes together for us. Although Joseph was not his biological father, never the less, Jesus was now in Joseph's family and this was in the line of David.

Application: When we meet Mary we learn that God is working out His plan to save sinners and He did it not by going to the top of the social elite but by going to the backwater village of Nazareth. As Martin Luther said, "God could have gone to Jerusalem and chosen Caiaphas' daughter and surrounded him with gold and fine things but instead God goes to Nazareth, a nowhere village and chooses a nobody named Mary to be Jesus' mother."

God's plan for our rescue required Jesus to humble Himself and enter into the misery of our lost and fallen condition. Only then can our Savior defeat sin by living a sinless life and yet dying on the cross in order to rescue the lowliest of sinners.<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2:5-7, *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."*

## 2. Jesus' birth announcement (vv. 28-33)

Everything about Mary's encounter with Gabriel in vv. 28-33 would have been troubling for Mary. Gabriel greets Mary, *"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you."*

Young women occupied a very low status in ancient times so the fact that Mary met an angel would have been amazing but Gabriel goes even further and he esteemed her with his greeting. To be told you are favored and that God is with you was the dream of most every Israelite whether you were a man or woman. Mary had just been given an amazing blessing. The lowliest of persons has now been lifted up by God.

Then in vv. 31-33 he gave even more amazing news. Gabriel told her the Messiah was about to arrive and not only is He coming but you will be His mother. Now keep in mind she was not married and had never been sexually active. So, if you thought that the announcement of John the Baptist's birth was amazing because Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son in their old age, now we hear that Mary is going to have a son and she isn't even married or sexually active.

Then, like John's birth announcement, Gabriel told her to name her son Jesus and that He is the *Son of the Most High*. The title of *The Most High* was one of King David's favorite titles to call God when he praised him. There is a sense that we are all sons and daughters of *The Most High* but Jesus possesses the unique title of Divine Sonship because He is the Second Person of the Trinity.

Finally, in vv. 32-33, Mary learns that Jesus is the heir to David's throne and not in a temporal sense but eternally. Jesus is the rightful heir to the throne of David. Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the ancient promises made. This was the angel's announcement to Mary.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Luke, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Note: This was why when this news reached Herod, he wanted to kill Jesus.

I think the question for you and me is this: Do you believe it? Do you trust the angel's promise that Jesus is the *Son of the Most High*, the long awaited *Savior of the World* who came to save sinners? This is what faith in God means—believing this good news. Friends, faith in God works and faith in Jesus will save you from eternity in Hell and to being in the glorious presence of Christ for eternity.

### 3. Finally let's look at Mary's response to the angel: Trusting God in times of confusion (vv. 34-38)

In v. 34 we hear Mary's question in response to the angel's announcement. Mary's question sounds a lot like Zechariah's question but there are some differences. Remember Zechariah had prayed for a son. Also, Zechariah has some biblical knowledge and therefore culpability that Mary did not possess. Zechariah was a priest and teacher of God's word. He was being held to a higher standard. Mary did not have his background in the word of God nor his education.

Yet, most importantly, we know from Mary's response in v. 38 that there was no unbelief in her question. There was in Zechariah's. She may have been perplexed and confused but she trusted God in her confusion.

This was why Gabriel responded the way he did in vv. 35-37. He did not rebuke her like he did Zechariah. Instead he explained in layman's terms how she would conceive and why it was important. *Jesus was to be holy*. As the Second Adam, Jesus was coming into the world sinless. He was holy and He would by His faith and obedience remain holy His entire life. Jesus was holy in His conception and holy when He was nailed to the cross. Jesus went through Hell on earth and suffered the wrath of God on the cross and yet He remained holy in order to save us from our sin. He defeated sin and death so that we can be holy and have eternal life with Him.

Lastly, Gabriel told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy and in v. 37 we have the very famous verse, "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" Verse 37 is an allusion to Genesis 18:14. In Genesis 18:14 the angel told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son in their old age and Sarah laughed but the angel responded, "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" It is a rhetorical question with the obvious answer—no, nothing is too hard for God.

### Conclusion

So . . . verse 38 closes out the tale of two birth announcements with a simple, humble confession of faith, "*And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.'*" *And the angel departed from her.*" This is quite the confession of faith for a young girl.

Roman Catholics call Mary: *The Blessed Virgin Mary* and she was. She received the amazing honor of being the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. She was blessed by God but she is not a mediator for God's people as they claim.

Mary is the picture of what it means to humbly and simply place your faith in God. Faith works! All that the angel had told her meant that her life was about to get very difficult. Some of it was perplexing but that did not prevent her from placing her life in God's hands.

One more thing we learn from the tale of two birth announcements—take God at His word. God wants us to take Him at His word. He wants us to trust Him, to place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. He wants us to by faith repent of our sins and turn to Jesus for forgiveness and new life.

Friends vv. 5-38 tell us about Jesus first advent but I have news for you. He will come again and the question is will you have faith in Jesus Christ on that day? Do not wait; for you and I do not know when He will return.