

# John's Birth Foretold

## Luke 1:2-25 ESV

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

<sup>8</sup> Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, <sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. <sup>11</sup> And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>18</sup> And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

<sup>24</sup> After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, <sup>25</sup> "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

## Introduction (adapted from an article by Tyler Kenney at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org))

Though their stories in Luke 1 are strikingly similar, Zechariah and Mary have <sup>two</sup> significant differences that Luke highlights to teach an amusingly ironic and encouraging lesson about grace and faith.

Here are their similarities:

- Both are visited by the angel Gabriel ([Luke 1:19](#); [1:26-27](#))
- Both are promised the miraculous birth of a son ([Luke 1:13](#); [1:31](#))
- Both are ~~equally~~ unfit to have a child: Zechariah's wife is barren, and Mary is a virgin ([Luke 1:7](#); [Luke 1:27](#))
- Both respond with equal perplexity—"How?" ([Luke 1:18](#); [1:34](#))

However

One of the major contrasts between Zechariah and Mary is that Zechariah is struck dumb (literally!) for his response to Gabriel whereas Gabriel answers Mary graciously

Why is Zechariah struck dumb and Mary isn't? Luke spells this out for us. When Zechariah questions Gabriel about the possibility of conceiving, the angel makes it clear that he is silenced because he "*did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time*" ([Luke 1:20](#)).

In Mary's case, however, Luke leaves it to Elizabeth (Zechariah's wife!) to tell us why she wasn't also muted. When Mary comes for a visit, Elizabeth greets her saying, "Blessed is *she who believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" ([Luke 1:45](#)). (Just imagine Elizabeth saying this loud enough for her helpless-to-respond husband to overhear in the next room.)

So, though Zechariah again seems more positioned by his age, experience, and exposure to the word of God to believe God's promise, we see that it is in fact Mary who has the greater faith.

Keep those distinctions in mind as we open up this passage and consider what we might learn from it this morning.

## Without Blame & Without Child – 1:5-7 (Introduction)

Introduction of time, characters, conflict

Placed in history: Herod (referred to as Herod the Great), king of Judea reigned from around 40BC; this occurs around 4BC

Main characters: Zechariah was a priest, Elizabeth was of priestly blood

- Righteous/blameless
  - Not positionally righteous as declared by God (as Paul uses the term)
  - *Morally* righteous as they conformed to God's law
  - Faithful saints who walk approvingly before God
  - They faithfully and consistently obeyed God – we would say “godly”
  - They were “spiritually exemplary”

*This type of person is...* A man/woman of integrity who trusted in God, sincerely worshiped the Lord, loved his/her family, and were consistent in his/her walk with God

Lack of children and were troubled

- Barrenness was often = reproach
- Barrenness and old age – doubly problematic

← CONFLICT

*Despite their blamelessness and righteousness*

• How did they feel?

**What did their blamelessness and righteousness look like through their disappointment?**

**Do you maintain your godliness in the midst of difficulties?**

## Priestly Prayer & Angelic Answer – 1:8-17 (Rising Action)

### Priestly Prayer – 1:8-12

Zechariah, as a priest, is in Jerusalem for one of the two week-long periods of service that are required of him

He is one of more than possibly 18,000 priests who could be serving at the temple over the course of the year

Due to the high number of priests, lots are cast to determine who will be allowed the honour and privilege of specific duties

The honour of offering incense is the most honourable service a priest could do; so honourable that a priest would only be allowed the privilege once in his lifetime

Zechariah would have been excited and anxious when he was chosen by the casting of lots to offer the evening incense on this particular day

His offering would coincide with the time of evening prayer and so the attendance at the temple would be significant

- Zechariah would enter the temple through the east-facing entrance as the multitude of people stood outside ready to offer their prayers and supplications the moment the smoke of the incense began to ascend
- With his censer in his hand, Zechariah prepares for the greatest moment he will experience as a priest
- As Zechariah entered, he would see the golden altar directly ahead of him, in front of the great veil which separated the Holy Place from the holy of Holies

- He glances to one side of the altar where the table of showbread stood
- Then he glances to the other side where the great lampstand was positioned
- Zechariah would feel the tension and anticipation growing in him as he prepared what would be the highlight of his vocational experience as a priest; the first and only time he would offer the incense on behalf of his people, his nation
- With his offering resulting in the strong incense rising up to God as a sweet smelling aroma, and with the crowds murmuring in prayer outside, with the weight of his once-in-a-lifetime duty weighing on his heart, he prays a prayer for the salvation of his people, for the fulfilment of God's promises, for the promised Messiah to come and save his people

Consider the suspense, tension, and excitement of this moment for the reader of Luke's gospel: high point of his <sup>(pinnacle)</sup> career, casting of lots, crowd of people praying all contribute to creating this moment

*At this moment, as the excitement has risen, as Zechariah's heart is soaring...*  
 Then the angel appears and Zechariah is terrified: there is a fear that is appropriate (respect, honour, recognition of power and authority) but this fear which Zechariah would demonstrate quickly gives way to terror

The angel's presence and Zechariah's profound anxiety deepen the drama: God is up to something

Adding to the drama even more is the fact of 400 years, since the time of the prophet Malachi, God has been silent and yet now he is about to speak again

### An Angelic Answer to Prayer – 1:13-17

To the drama, tension, and suspense, the angel adds a sense of terror and his message gives rise to great anticipation; let's not ignore the intensity of this story

Fear is not necessary, the angel brings good news; foreshadowing Jesus's birth announcement to Mary

Elizabeth will become pregnant with a boy, who they are to name John

This would be an answer to Zechariah personally—a child—and to the nation of Israel—a prophet to prepare the way of the Messiah

All indications are that this child would be special: normally a father would name the child, but in this case God not only precedes his birth with the heavenly instructions to Zechariah, but He also names the child

The child will bring personal joy to Zechariah and corporate joy to many who look to God's promises

This is the initiating of the promise of salvation and the fulfillment of all that God had spoken

“Joy comes because John's ministry signals the Lord's decisive work for salvation.”

Who is this child named John who would be born?

- The story begins by mentioning King Herod, who would be called Herod the Great by the earthly citizens, but now a heavenly citizen informs Zechariah that his son would be great.

- He would be great because of his character and his mission: most of the focus in this angelic answer to prayer focuses on his mission *is necessary because the key is fulfillment*
- Special consecration (no strong drink) and special empowerment by the Spirit (filled from the womb, permanent) point to his mission as a prophet of God
- God's imposition of the vow not to drink, which was usually voluntary, indicates that John is special, specially set apart to God
- The Spirit's filling is unique-doesn't come and go *but resides from the womb*
- Suggests John is a transitional figure, bridging the gap between the Old covenant and the New: from promise to fulfillment
- Mission is threefold: going before, turning, preparing

*How  
John  
speaks to  
John's mission*

○ **Matthew 11:7-14 ESV** <sup>7</sup> As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. <sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

<sup>11</sup> Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup> From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. <sup>13</sup> For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, <sup>14</sup> and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

- Going before *(in the spirit and power of Elijah)*
  - Like Elijah whose ministry involved “the miraculous, as well as powerful declaration of the need of God’s people to return to a faithful walk with God
- Turning
  - Turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just
  - John will look for reform horizontally—people to people—and vertically—people to their God
- Preparing
  - John will call out of Israel a people who are prepared and responsive to God’s way of salvation
  - **Malachi 3:1 ESV** “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

The story has progressed with increasing anticipation, anxiety, suspense, and tension: something significant is about to happen. God is moving; the angel has said so. But what next? Where will this story go?

Before we consider how this story progresses, let us ask a question of ourselves: Do we persevere in prayer?

“God delays often, but He does not forget. Blessings may come today as the result of old prayers which have almost passed from our memory and our hope” (McLaren 5).

*↳ Have you let prayers pass from your memory?  
Have your requests faded away?  
Have you given up on your desires?*

*Let 2018 be a year where we persevere in PRAYER!  
God is faithful! He will fulfill his promises.*



## Risky Request & Righteous Response – 1:18-22

### Risky Request – 1:18

Zechariah exposes his humanity with a request for a sign because he questions the angel's words due to his and his wife's age

The Lord grants the sign, but issues a rebuke and a consequence due to Zechariah's unbelief

### A Righteous Response – 1:19-22

The rebuke: believe this good news! Believe God's word!

Zechariah is not unbelieving, he "leans towards unbelief"

The consequence: unable to speak (or hear 1:62)

- The reason for the consequence is lack of faith, unbelief: "because you did not believe my words"

*The tension and suspense have built to this moment...*

The climax occurs with Zechariah being unable to speak: <sup>22</sup> 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.

*the climax*  
This is key because: *Zechariah's inability to speak accomplishes several things:*

- Confirms the angel's role/function (voice of God) and his prophetic accuracy
- Confirms the promise that is coming – non-speaking is true therefore John will be conceived and born
- It initiates the fulfillment of God's promises – John's birth will be the start
- It indicates the main problem is UNBELIEF

## Unbelief

### Flavel: Sacramental Meditations

- Doctrine: That the best Christians do sensibly feel and sadly bewail the working of their corruptions, and that in the very seasons and opportunities of their communion with God
  - It's not just that Christians sin—we all know that—but we actually sin as we commune with God
- Zechariah – represents a “best” sort of Christian, in the very season of his communion with God he feels the working of his inner corruption
- Flavel notes the many beautiful benefits of communion with God and our propensity to sin during those times, risking the loss of the benefits. Flavel notes that in our communion there is: “a sensible presence of God; there are manifestations of pardon, peace and love; there are reviving influences and fresh anointings of the Spirit; there are a thousand mercies of this kind, that in their seasons are communicated to men in the way of duty; and would it not grieve a man to the very heart and soul, to be defeated of those inestimable treasures, by the breaking forth of the unbelief, pride, or vanity of his own heart, when such mercies are almost in his hand?”
- Zechariah should have experienced all of the gracious and beautiful benefits of his communion with God, *including answer to prayer and the fulfillment of promise*, but rather he faced judgment because in the midst of his duty and communion unbelief rose in his heart!
- Unbelief is a particularly problematic sin that J. C. Ryle notes is “one of the first corruptions which came into man's heart in the day of the fall, when Eve believed the devil rather than God. Unbelief is one of the most deep-rooted sins by which a saint is plagued, and from which he is never entirely freed until he dies. ... Few sins appear to be so peculiarly provoking to God, as *the sin of unbelief*. None certainly have called down such heavy judgments on men. It is a *practical denial* of God's Almighty power, to doubt whether He can do a thing — when He undertakes to do it. It is giving the lie to God, to doubt whether He means to do a thing, when He has plainly promised that it shall be done. ... Unbelief, in short, is the true cause of a thousand spiritual diseases ...”

How do we fight unbelief? How do we fight unbelief if it rises and wreaks havoc *in our lives,* even in the midst of our communion with God?

Fighting unbelief, even as it arises in our communion with God:

- Three ways of*
- 1) Know God's promises
  - 2) Realize God's promises are for you – **2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV** For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. (must have warrant for claiming a promise) *(conceiving a child)*
  - 3) Apply God's promises using APTAT *mnemonic device*
    - **Admit** that without Christ you can do nothing.
    - **Pray** for God's help!
    - **Trust** in a promise of God suited to your need.
    - **Act** with humble confidence in God's help.
    - **Thank** God for the good that comes.

*Let me give you an example*  
Leading the church – what he has called me to

- Unbelief – doubting I can accomplish what he has called me to accomplish and expect failure. This is the sin of unbelief!
  - Admit I cannot do it.
  - Pray for his help.
  - Trust is a promise – **Matthew 16:18 ESV** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
  - Act with humble confidence.
  - Thank God for the good.

*Unbelief rose up in Zechariah even as he was communing with God, even as he was hearing good news for himself personally + for his nation. If we are honest, we will confess that unbelief often rises in our hearts throughout our days even in our communion with God.*

*Let's fight unbelief through prayer, confession, and practical trust in the promises of God*

## Promise Provided & Reproach Removed – 1:23-25 (falling action and conclusion)

Zechariah went home and the promise is fulfilled

- The promise is fulfilled initially as Elizabeth conceives
- Removal of reproach = joy and relief + recognition of personal attention *from God*
- This is why we must fight unbelief: He is worthy of our faith; we can trust in his word.

This story isn't primarily about the conception and birth and life of John the Baptist though, on the surface, this seems to be the main topic. This passage is primarily about humanity in general, and the Christian in particular, and our tendency towards unbelief; specifically, it addresses our unbelief in regards to the promised salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

### GOSPEL

We need saving. Our sin separates us from God and puts us under the wrath and judgment of God. But from the very beginning, God promised salvation: To Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses and the Israelites, to King David, and to all the earth God promised a deliverer would come.

John was to prepare the way for this Saviour; the Saviour is Jesus Christ. And he saves all those who repent of their sin and trust in him and his work on their behalf. John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, would say of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of **G**od who takes away the sins of the world.

Will you believe his word of salvation to you? Will you turn from your sin and trust in Jesus? Or will you remain in unbelief?

God will bring all things to fulfillment; he has brought salvation to fulfillment in Christ!

2018 – a year of fighting unbelief with faith in the promises of God