

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us,<sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us,<sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus,<sup>4</sup> that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.<sup>5</sup> There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elizabeth.<sup>6</sup> And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.<sup>7</sup> But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.<sup>8</sup> So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division,<sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.<sup>12</sup> And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is 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 in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also 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> He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord."<sup>18</sup> And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."<sup>19</sup> And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.<sup>20</sup> But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."<sup>21</sup> And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.<sup>22</sup> But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.<sup>23</sup> So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.<sup>24</sup> Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying,<sup>25</sup> "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among people."

<sup>39</sup> Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah,<sup>40</sup> and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.<sup>41</sup> And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed *are* you among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of your womb!<sup>43</sup> But why *is* this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?<sup>44</sup> For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.<sup>45</sup> Blessed *is* she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."

<sup>57</sup> Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.<sup>58</sup> When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

<sup>59</sup> So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias.<sup>60</sup> His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John."<sup>61</sup> But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name."<sup>62</sup> So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called.<sup>63</sup> And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled.<sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he spoke, praising God.<sup>65</sup> Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.<sup>66</sup> And all those who heard *them* kept *them* in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him.<sup>67</sup> Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

<sup>68</sup> "Blessed *is* the Lord God of Israel,  
For He has visited and redeemed His people,

<sup>69</sup> And has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
 In the house of His servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,  
 Who *have been* since the world began,  
<sup>71</sup> That we should be saved from our enemies  
 And from the hand of all who hate us,  
<sup>72</sup> To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers  
 And to remember His holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:  
<sup>74</sup> To grant us that we,  
 Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,  
 Might serve Him without fear,  
<sup>75</sup> In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.  
<sup>76</sup> “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;  
 For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,  
<sup>77</sup> To give knowledge of salvation to His people  
 By the remission of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> Through the tender mercy of our God,  
 With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;  
<sup>79</sup> To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,  
 To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

#### Introduction

Last week we studied one of the prophecies from Isaiah concerning Christmas. We discovered that it was a sign of God’s power, through the “Virgin Birth”, a sign of God’s love, that He came personally in the flesh, and a sign of God’s faithfulness.

This week we are still preparing for Christmas. However, it concerns an old couple called Zacharias and Elizabeth.

This couple and the miracle birth of their son John are not often spoken about in connection with Christmas.

Nevertheless, Luke gives us at least 50 verses about this couple, and in his gospel, he interweaves it into the Christmas story.

Luke is the only person of all the Gospel writers who did not know the physical Jesus.

He was not present during Jesus’ three- year ministry.

Luke’s research was speaking to eyewitnesses of these events.

Luke visited the people who actually saw the physical Jesus, his family, His disciples, and His friends.

As a doctor Luke was very interested in the miracle birth of two babies.

In v. 1-5 Luke tells us about the reliability and accuracy of his gospel.

#### Luke 1:1-5 (NKJ)

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. <sup>5</sup> There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elizabeth.

#### Luke 1:1-5 (NLT)

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. <sup>2</sup> They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. <sup>[a]</sup> <sup>3</sup> Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. <sup>5</sup> When Herod was king of

Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron.

Luke particularly mentions that some of his information came from “**ministers of the word**”.

It is important that we realise that these “**ministers**” referred to people who were ministering and doing God’s will.

After Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple was torn in half.

The significance of this is very great.

It meant that those who believed in what Jesus had achieved for them by dying on the cross, were able to have direct access to God.

They didn’t need a “Priest” to act on their behalf.

This means that every born again believer is a minister, serving Jesus wherever he or she happens to be.

It doesn’t matter if you are a cleaner, office worker, part-time worker, or company director, you can be a minister for Jesus where God places you.

Luke got his information from people whose faith was real and living.

I am going to divide the story about this old couple and their son into three sections.

Firstly, we will learn about the Angel’s announcement to Zacharias in Luke 1: v. 5-23.

Then we will cover a conversation between Mary and Elizabeth, followed by the birth and naming of her son in v. 39-45 & 57-66.

Finally, we will look at Zacharias’ prophecy about his son in v. 67-79.

### **1. The announcement about another miracle birth – v. 5-23.**

In Luke Chapter 1 v. 5-7 He gives us a little background into this old couple.

Luke marks the historical background and says it was “in the days of Herod”.

This is important because it connects the time with the birth of Jesus.

Zacharias was a Priest and Elizabeth came from the family of Aaron, who were the “High Priests”.

We are told that they were both “righteous”.

This does not mean that they were sinless.

It means that the desire of their hearts was to belong to God, serve Him and obey God’s commands.

They were living their lives to serve God.

We are told that both of them were “**well advanced in years**”.

**We don’t know their exact ages but Zacharias was probably in his 90’s and Elizabeth in her 80’s.**

It is important that we realise their age.

Medically they were well past child bearing age.

Also we are told that Elizabeth had never had children.

In v. 8-10 Luke sets the scene by telling us that Zacharias was inside the Temple, burning incense.

At that time there were 24 divisions of priests in Israel. This meant that there were too many people for the jobs required.

Therefore, each division took a yearly turn to serve for a week.

Only one priest at a time had the honour of burning the incense at the altar.

This special honour came only once in a life time.

This burning of incense was **symbolic of the prayers of God’s people towards God**.

This is why we are told that a very large crowd had gathered outside the Temple to pray.

So here was an Old Priest, about 90 years old, having a once in a life time special experience in the Temple of God, when suddenly an “**Angel of the Lord**” appeared to him.

It is no wonder we are told that Zacharias was afraid. (v. 12)

The Angel said to Zacharias “**your prayer is heard**”. He must have been praying all of his life for a son, but it hadn’t happened.

The Angel said that his wife Elizabeth would have a son and he **must call his name John**.

The Angel goes on to describe the ministry of this son and the impact that this son would have upon people.

In v. 14-17 we discover these four key things.

1. Zacharias and many other people would rejoice at the birth of his son.
2. Zacharias's son would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even in his mother's womb, and he would be great in the sight of God.
3. The son would not drink any wine or strong drink.
4. The son would be a great evangelist, turning many of the hearts of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

After this wonderful announcement given by the Angel, Zacharias challenged the Angel concerning his announcement.

He said to the Angel "**How shall I know this?**"

In other words, Zachariah was looking for proof or evidence about his announcement, he doubted the words of the Angel.

The Angel announced that his name was called "**Gabriel**" and that he stands in God's presence, and was sent directly from God with this message.

In v. 20 we are told that the Angel said to Zachariah

<sup>20</sup> But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

When Zachariah left the Temple he couldn't speak.

The people were amazed, they thought that he had seen a vision.

Zacharias then went home after he had finished his duties in the Temple.

We are told in v. 24 that Elizabeth did conceive and hid herself for 5 months.

Before we move on to the next section I would like to make two applications here.

### **1. Answers to prayer after many years.**

Zacharias had obviously been praying for a great deal of his life that he would have a son. That didn't happen. I doubt that he was praying this prayer in his 90's or even in his 70's or 80's.

Nevertheless, he did pray that prayer for many years.

Suddenly God answered his prayers of many years and allowed him to have a son.

This son was going to be very special to Zacharias and to God and to Jesus.

There are times in our lives that we pray very specific prayers about important things that we would like to see happen in our lives.

However, **they don't happen, and we wonder if they ever will.**

For some of us today, God is going to surprise us by answering those prayers.

Some of you will **get married** when you thought that it would never happen.

Some of you will **have children** when you thought it would not happen, although you prayed for it.

**Be encouraged that if it is God's will it will happen.**

Never give up praying and believing on what you sincerely believe to be God's will for your life.

God promised my wife Wendy when we left Japan in 1992 that one day we would return. **It didn't happen for 25 years, but then it did.**

We prayed and we wept but it didn't happen, but then it did, in God's timing for His purposes, for His Glory.

Be encouraged today if you are waiting for God to answer your prayers.

Don't make the mistake Abraham made by trying to answer your own prayers.

God is big enough and powerful enough to answer your prayers in an amazing way. Just walk in step with the Holy Spirit, day by day.

### **2. Doubting Gods word.**

Zacharias doubted God's word, which was conveyed to him by an Angel.

As a result of his unbelief, he was struck dumb for 9 months.

It is not easy to lose your voice suddenly and not be able to communicate without writing something down.

He wouldn't have learnt sign language and he probably had a hard time.

God did not forsake him. He just made an important point.

The point is that if we doubt God's word, we miss out on the blessing that it contains for us and for others.

Sometimes we are disciplined by God, like Zacharias, and then when that discipline is over, we are blessed by God.

Remember Doubting Thomas, he didn't believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. He missed out on the blessing for over a week.

However, Jesus was very "gracious" to him and gave him a personal visit.

When we doubt God's word, we doubt His power to fulfil His promise.

This brings God down to our level of power and understanding.

This is wrong because the Bible teaches that God is "All Powerful".

(Luke 1: v. 37)

<sup>37</sup> For with God nothing will be impossible."

(James 1: v. 5-8)

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> *he is* a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

God will always accomplish things in our lives, even if it seems impossible, if it is His will to do so.

We must surrender to God and His word.

## **2. Elizabeth's conversation with Mary and the naming of her son – v. 39-45 & 57-66.**

While Elizabeth was hiding away in her home she had a visit from Mary, her cousin.

Mary had some amazing news for Elizabeth.

She probably told her that the same Angel Gabriel that had visited Zacharias, also visited her.

However, the announcement about her baby was a little different.

Yes, it was a miracle, but of a different sort.

Mary, who was a virgin, was told that she would have a miracle conception and give birth to a son and she was to call him Jesus. (v.31)

We are told in v. 41 that as soon as Mary was greeted in the home of Elizabeth, that her baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In v. 42 Elizabeth spoke out with a loud voice, obviously moved by the Holy Spirit, to confirm the blessing upon Mary.

Remember Mary was a young girl, about 16 years old and Elizabeth was an older lady that she respected.

Mary would have been reassured by the words of Elizabeth.

We are told in v. 56 that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months.

This places Mary at the house of Elizabeth when her baby was born. (v.36)

Before we move on I think we need to have some application here.

### **Application**

God arranged for two women at opposite ends of the age scale to have 3 months together, encouraging one another.

They both had miracle babies, and God allowed them time together.

I think that this is wonderful.

It doesn't matter if we have exciting news or depressing news to share, it is always good to share that news with somebody else.

If we are going through a very difficult time in our lives, it really helps to download that problem to someone who understands.

The New Testament is full of challenges to support one another during the difficult times, but also to rejoice with those who are enjoying happy times.

Two weeks ago Mark Jon Yap won his boxing match. We can rejoice with him in that success. Today he is in the Philippines with his parents.

However, many of us have perhaps tried to support and comfort people going through real hard times.

As a Pastor I have to do lots of this type of ministry.

As a congregation of God's people, **we all need to be in the ministry of encouragement and rejoicing.**

Please make an effort to do both.

Sometimes it is tempting to run away from people with problems, especially those with depression.

In the same manner, we do not always rejoice with other people's blessings.

**Take an example from Mary and Elizabeth today.**

<sup>58</sup> When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

So Elizabeth's baby was born and he was circumcised when he was 8 days old, as was the Jewish custom ordained by God.

(Genesis 17: v.10)

<sup>10</sup> This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;

It would have been the normal Jewish custom to call the son Zacharias.

However, Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said that the baby would be called "John".

The family questioned Elizabeth's decision to name her child John, so they involved the Father that he might have the final say on the matter.

Remember for the last 9 months Zacharias was dumb; he couldn't speak.

**Zacharias wrote on a tablet that the baby was to be called "John".**

Immediately Zacharias was able to speak.

The words of the Angel from v. 20 came true.

<sup>20</sup> But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

After this, fear came upon the crowd who were present at the circumcision and naming ceremony. Word went out in all of the area and the people wondered what kind of child John was going to be.

### 3. **Zacharias' Prophecy - v. 67-79.**

When you haven't spoken for 9 months, and then you are filled with the Holy Spirit, **what you say next is worth listening to.**

So let us look into what Zacharias said in v. 68-79.

In this prophecy we need to observe three important things.

1. The Prophecy is from God and it is about the future – v. 67.

We are told that Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and obviously released from his discipline, through not believing the words of the Angel.

2. The Prophecy is about the coming Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ— v.68-75.

It is important to note that all of the verbs are written in the past tense.

Zacharias was telling us that it has happened before it actually happened.

Only God can do this!!!

We are told that the Messiah, Jesus Christ has visited and redeemed His people.

The word redeemed means to buy back.

Through Jesus Christ, God was going to buy back His people.

The only way in which we can be a child of God is if we believe in what Jesus Christ has done, to pay the ransom price to buy us back for God.

There is a song that we used to sing a lot at Bible College.

It is an old song written by Fanny Crosby, but still well worth quoting:

I will quote the first and third verses:

Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it!  
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;  
Redeemed through His infinite mercy,  
His child and forever I am.

I think of my blessed Redeemer,  
I think of Him all the day long;  
I sing, for I cannot be silent;  
His love is the theme of my song.

Before we leave this section, please note that Zacharias is supporting the prophecy about the Messiah from all of the Prophets and also way back to Genesis Chapter three that we covered last week. ( ...since the world began..)

Also in v.72- 73 Zacharias reminds us that the coming of the Messiah Jesus, is part of God's fulfillment of the "**Covenant-Promise**" made to Abraham. We learnt of those promises to Abraham last week, so I won't repeat that.

However, the promises made to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31: v. 31-34 are very relevant.

<sup>31</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— <sup>32</sup> not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup> But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

<sup>34</sup> No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

3. The Prophecy is also about the Messiah's preparation person, who we call John the Baptist. This is Zacharias's son. — v. 76-80

There are 4 clear things that are prophesied about John the Baptist.

Firstly, we are told that John would be the "**Greatest Prophet**'.

This is amazing because Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah and all the Old Testament prophets were wonderfully used of God, but this baby was going to be the "**Greatest**" among all the prophets.

Secondly this prophet was going to "**prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah**". When God is going to do a great work, He prepares people and situations in a wonderful way.

This prophet was going to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus.

One of the most interesting periods of Church history to me was the way in which God chose to send Jesus at the time in history when there was a vast Roman Empire. The big advantage for the spread of the gospel was a common language and good road networks, plus many other things.

God prepared for Jesus through the Prophet John.

Before we close I would like to make one last bit of application for us.

### **Application**

We may not be as important as John the Baptist, but we do have a message to proclaim about Jesus this Christmas.

That message is important.

**We need to pray for God to prepare hearts to receive the Gospel message.**

**Remember the parable of the "Sower" in Matthew Chapter 13: v.1-23.**

**It was the seed that fell on the good ground, that yielded a crop.**

**The good ground represented the heart.**

We need to pray that God will prepare our hearts, that we might be a blessing to those who are seeking Salvation through Jesus Christ.

Next week is important. It is Christmas Eve. Please invite everybody who you know, but don't forget to **pray for prepared hearts.**

**Only God can do that work if you PRAY.**