

## **The Birth of John the Baptist** **Luke 1:5 – 25, 57 – 80**

John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah predicted by both Isaiah and Malachi, had a miraculous start, not so spectacular as that of his cousin, Jesus, but miraculous nonetheless. But this story in Luke 1 is more than just curious history. It teaches us several things about the nature of God, and prompts us to think about what we ought to do with that newfound picture.

As I read each section of the story, each of which are rather lengthy, I will insert little explanations of some of the words and practices we will encounter there, to make this scene from more than 2000 years ago more realistic. In your handout, I put the Scriptures in italics, and the helpful technical details as bullets interspersed immediately after each historical oddity.

So, here we go, starting in Luke 1 verse 5:

*There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah.*

- In 1 Chronicles 24, King David divided all the descendants of Aaron into 24 courses or divisions. They rotated week by week, although everyone served for the three major festivals (Tabernacles, Passover, and Pentecost). So a priest would serve twice a year in his rotation, plus the three festivals. Since the festivals were each a week long, that is a total of 51 weeks, so the schedule rotated slowly through the calendar so that each priest would serve at convenient times and inconvenient times

*His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.*

- One of the requirements for a high priest was that his wife had to be also from the clan of Aaron, so Zacharias was technically qualified, although probably not politically minded enough to campaign for the job.

*And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.*

- Twice a day, a priest was selected by lot, probably by drawing a pebble out of bag, each pebble having the name of one priest currently on duty, to trim the wicks on the ten seven-branched candlesticks, the menorah, and to remove the ash and add fresh incense to the altar of incense which sat in the middle of the huge curtain which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.

*And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.*

- It was the custom of the day for the faithful among the inhabitants of Jerusalem to take a break from working at 3 pm to go to the Temple and pray as the priest was performing his duties, which took a bit of time, trimming 70 wicks plus cleaning up and restocking the altar of incense.

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 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. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.*

- It is worthy of mention that the faithful of Israel were getting a little worried because no prophet had appeared for about four centuries.

*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. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 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."*

- The part that predicted that John would not drink wine or distilled spirits is worded somewhat like the instructions for a Nazarite vow found in Numbers 6. The angel let Zacharias know that John would be a prophet. The part about "from his mother's womb" probably was cryptic to Zacharias, but came true in verse 41, which we will cover next time. The reference to the "spirit and power of Elijah" and "turning the hearts of the fathers to the children" is from Malachi 4:5 – 6.

*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." 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. 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."*

- We might not be able to determine from what Zacharias said whether Zacharias doubted or not, but Gabriel knew.

*And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. 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.*

- This interaction between Gabriel and Zacharias apparently took more than a minute or two – long enough that people in the court of the Temple were concerned. Further, when Zacharias came out, he was not able to speak. This became obvious when Zacharias could not give the traditional blessing which had been recited twice each day for more than a thousand years, from Numbers 6:24 – 26, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace."

*So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."*

- In that time, a woman who could not have children was considered cursed by God, probably for some terrible misdeed. Luke cleared that up because, back in verse 6, he declared them both to be righteous before God, blameless.

What can we learn about the nature of God in this scene. One thing is that God keeps the faithful informed. We do not operate in the dark. The intentions of the gods (to use the pagan perspective) are mysterious. The intentions of the One True God are not. Note that the predictions about the forerunner of the Messiah by Isaiah and Malachi were published about 700 and 400 years in advance. Further, in Daniel, God predicted a series of events that culminated with the Maccabees, about 150 years before Jesus, so those who cared to know about the Messiah understood; after the war that resulted in the re-establishment of Israel in 164 BC, the next event on the calendar was that forerunner and then the promised Messiah. Here, God let

people know that the Messiah would come in that generation. By using a priest who was at work in the Temple and providing a clear miracle, the news would be repeated among those who cared, generating anticipation of that promised event.

We can learn from this also that God is not playing catch-up. God is not just reacting to the mess people have made of His creation. He has a plan to separate the sheep from the goats, the faithful from the unbelievers, those He wants to adopt into His eternal family from those who would just make a mess of eternity.

But, from our side of the cross, what does God need to inform us about? The Scriptures have been completed. In Zechariah 13:2 and Daniel 9:24, God already predicted, centuries in advance, the end of that class of people who delivered the Scriptures: the prophets. Plus, we know that the earthly run of the Messiah is complete. Of course, many want to find hints about when Jesus might come back, so they imagine various signs of the end, but Jesus, Paul, and Peter all clearly described that that return would come as a “thief in the night.” So, unlike the ancient rabbis who studied diligently to understand when the Messiah would come, we have no clues about when He will come back again.

But, we do have something even more important to discover in the Scriptures. God has given us a long list of promises about how we can overcome in this life, have joy and peace in this life, and position ourselves for easy entry into the new heaven and new earth. There are hundreds of such promises, we could even call them predictions from New Testament prophets, scattered across the New Testament. Just sticking to the part of the New Testament addressed to congregations of the faithful, there are more than 600. If we search the Scriptures as diligently as those ancient rabbis, we can have a confident expectation about how earthly life and eternal life will unfold. Every place where the word “mystery” is used in the New Testament, the author reveals the answer to that mystery in the next paragraph. There are no unknowns left except the one God said He was not going to tell us: when the end will come. For that one, He just said, “Be ready all the time.”

Researching the New Testament for those promises is even more important than figuring out when the Messiah would come over 2000 years ago. And, it is not complicated. Ordinary people are promised that they will understand it. In fact, one of those promises, which is in at least a half dozen places in the letters to congregations in the New Testament, is that we just need to use good reading comprehension, and ordinary logic, and pay attention to the context. In my Bible, when I find a promise, I put a little dot in the margin so I can find them again with even less work.

Getting back to the story, I am going to skip verses 26 – 56 because they deal more with Mary than with Zacharias, Elizabeth, and John. I will include them in the next lesson about the birth of Jesus in chapter 2. Picking up in verse 57:

*Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. 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. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. Then fear came on all*

*who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all those who heard kept them in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him.*

- The custom of circumcising a male child on the eighth day comes from Genesis 17:12, from God's instructions to Abraham about the beginning and future of the practice.
- On a humorous note, the people at the bris made signs to Zacharias. But, Zacharias was mute, not deaf. Just goes to show that people have never done well dealing with persons with disabilities.

What can we learn about the nature of God in this scene? God allows time for His events to sink in, grow, and produce fruit. Using the parable of the sower in Luke 8, the Word, the logic of God, falls on all sorts of people. Some are just not interested, some are shallow so nothing develops, the interest of some is choked out by the cares of this life. But some, after a time, produce growth and more seeds. This is, perhaps, a good-news-bad-news situation. On the minus side, just like in John's youth, many heard about his miraculous birth and the predictions about him, but the passage of time and the difficulties of life caused it to fade into the background. If God had done something miraculous when John started his public preaching, maybe he would have had more success. But, maybe that excitement surrounding the miracle would fade and John would have had the same yield through the method God chose. On the positive side, those who had thirty plus years to anticipate what John would turn out to be had the advantage of being able to experience that joy that results from anticipating the fruition of the promises of God. The way God chose blessed the faithful with decades of joy before John actually began his ministry.

Further, we can see in this scene that God expects us to think, not just react. Of course, a lot of the time our thinking is somewhat muddled by our past experiences and our culture and our level of knowledge, wisdom, and experience. And, the paths we follow as a result of this thinking are littered with misunderstandings, illogic, and bad advice. How can this requirement to think be a good thing? Wouldn't it be better if God just gave us a step-by-step training manual. No, because we need to learn to think if we are to overcome in this broken world. All people of all time have lived in the midst of deception – sometimes self-deception, sometimes con-man deception, sometimes both. It takes time to think it through. The messages from God are designed to be understood by ordinary people, so they are not overly complicated. But the deceptions of this world are complicated. That's how deception works. The con-man's method is to make it just complex enough to blow it by the unsuspecting. God leaves time for logical thinking to develop.

Just as God gave the people of Israel a generation to think through the ramifications of the arrival of the forerunner, God gives us a lifetime to find the gaps in our own understanding, where we have blithely accepted a slick doctrine that was based on bad reasoning, or traditions we have absorbed without really thinking about them, or conclusions we drew without checking the context or finding other places in the Scriptures that give more details on the subject at hand.

Would we have tracked John as he matured from toddler to child to teen to adult? Or would John have faded into the background of our thinking? Think of the joy we would have missed by not keeping that anticipation alive.

So what can we do about that? I suggest that we all question our beliefs. Any fool can prove himself right; the goal is to prove yourself wrong. But many are afraid of that process because, in proving themselves wrong, they feel like they are condemning themselves or, worse

yet, condemning their deceased family members who always accepted what I just figured out was not what the Bible really said. That feeling comes from a false doctrine called “doctrinal sin,” the idea that, if you misunderstand any of the “essential” doctrines, that is sin and you are going to hell. First, such a doctrine fails to include our redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus paid our debts to justice already. At the Judgment, the question is “faith or not,” not “what did you do wrong.” Second, the definition of an essential doctrine is a bit fluid, since no such list appears in the New Testament.

Instead of fearing the discovery of a hole in our thought processes, we should rejoice at our growth in faith. Growth is an essential characteristic of Biblical faith. If we are not growing, we are dead, spiritually speaking. If we are growing, we are filtering out the misconceptions. That path of discovery is a wellspring of joy, not fear. So, we should be eager to go back and re-read the Scriptures and question what we think they say, and be excited when we clear something up where we had taken the easy path of just accepting what someone told me, or neglecting the context, instead putting all the ideas together into a coherent whole, rather than a pile of disjointed pieces.

Moving on to the rest of the story, picking up in verse 67:

*Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:*

*“Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,*

*For He has visited and redeemed His people,*

- Redeemed = purchased from captivity

*And has raised up a horn of salvation for us*

*In the house of His servant David,*

- The Messiah is on the way

*As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,*

*Who have been since the world began,*

*That we should be saved from our enemies*

*And from the hand of all who hate us,*

*To perform the mercy promised to our fathers*

*And to remember His holy covenant,*

*The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:*

*To grant us that we,*

*Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,*

*Might serve Him without fear,*

*In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.*

*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,*

- Isaiah 40:3 about the forerunner

*To give knowledge of salvation to His people*

*By the remission of their sins,*

*Through the tender mercy of our God,*

*With which the Dayspring from on high shall visit us;*

*To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,*

*To guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

*So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.*

What does this prophecy by Zacharias tell us about the nature of God? I think this section illustrates well that God gives big pictures, not isolated bits and pieces. An incredible number of good, church-going people have heard and even remember bits and pieces of the Bible story, but have never put it all together. For example, children are taught stories from the Bible, but each is isolated from anything around it or from its place in history. Many have never made sense of the Old Testament – New Testament thing. So, they grab a piece from the Law of Moses and drag it into the church. Whole denominations have been built on that one problem. Most church-goers could not put the Old Testament faithful in Hebrews 11 in chronological order. And, by the way, several big points are made in the New Testament based on that chronology. Zacharias, in this one poem, connects Abraham, David, Isaiah, the captivity of Israel, the forerunner of the Messiah, and the Messiah in one stream of consciousness thought. God presents big pictures, not bits and pieces.

Good church-going people get all tied up on the details without knowing the big picture, so end up applying the details in ways that are in conflict with the big picture. For example, God had a goal in mind before He started creating. Putting it in one sentence, God's terminal objective was and still is a big family that will last. God determined that exactly two characteristics were necessary for that eternal family so it will not end up like a longer version of earth. If God lets in any ringers, the whole system will fall apart. The two characteristics are mutual trust and selfless concern (we call them faith and love). The whole Bible story is based on that objective. The universe was created as an incubator for that faith. The methodology is the same from end to end; as Zacharias put it, "To give light to those in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Some people appreciate God's light and peace. Some want to go their own way. That's why the story unfolds the way it does.

The big concepts are what we need to discover in the Bible, not the minutia. It's about light and peace, not rules and authority. If, as we read the Bible, we are looking for those big concepts that govern everything, that are true no matter which page you are on, then the Bible will make a lot of sense.

The way that God brought that forerunner, John the Baptist, into the world illustrates that God has an overall objective and sensible, plain methods for getting there.