

# **A Promise Kept, Part 1**

## **The Birth of John Announced**

Luke 1:5-25

Advice columnist Abigail Van Buren once received the following letter from a reader:

“Dear Abby, I am 44 and would like to meet a man my age with no bad habits. Rose.”

Abby replied: “Dear Rose, So would I.”

On their 50th wedding anniversary, a couple was asked the secret of their long and happy marriage. The husband said, “I have tried never to be selfish. After all, there is no ‘I’ in the word ‘marriage.’”

The wife said, “For my part, I have never corrected my husband’s spelling.”

The story of Christmas according to Luke begins by introducing us to a sweet old couple that has been blessed with a long and happy relationship. But, there has also been disappointment. Zechariah and Elizabeth have never been graced with the child they longed for. That was about to change.

God’s voice had been silent for four centuries. The last of the prophets had spoken long ago, and all that remained was for the Jewish nation to faithfully wait for *Messiah*, a Savior and King from God.

The ancient land of the Jews was occupied by the Roman Empire. Herod the Great ruled locally as an agent of Rome. He claimed the title “king of the Jews” when he promoted his massive building projects, but he was no Jew at all. He was Idumean, descended from Esau rather than Jacob. By the time Jesus was born, Herod had become a murderous and suspicious old man who slaughtered anyone he thought posed a threat to his throne. Herod even executed some of his own sons out of his demented paranoia.

On the religious front, several groups vied for control. The *Sadducees* represented a priesthood that was politically corrupt and theologically liberal. They believed in nothing that required faith such as afterlife or angels. They protected their cushy positions by currying favor with Rome. The *Pharisees* were religious purists who claimed to love God’s Law, but their obsession with ritual minutiae undermined their grasp of the spirit of the Law. The *Zealots* plotted at every turn to drive the Romans from their land by force, seeing a potential *messiah* in every charismatic radical that crossed the political stage. Another group, the *Essenes*, lived as hermits in the wilderness to avoid the worldliness of their contemporaries. None of these religious parties captured the yearning hearts of the masses.

A few people of simple faith, called “the quiet of the land,” simply waited for the coming of God’s *Messiah*. Among these faithful few were a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

<sup>5</sup>In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

<sup>8</sup>Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup>And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup>Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid,

Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. <sup>16</sup>Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

<sup>19</sup>The angel answered, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup>And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup>When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

<sup>23</sup>When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup>After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup>“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” – Luke 1:5-25

God was keeping His ancient promise to Israel. The Deliverer was on the way. As the stage was set for the tender story of the first Christmas, three dynamics of God’s activity become apparent.

## **I. God’s Wisdom**

### **A. God’s Hand Was Present in the Timing of these Events**

Gabriel appeared to Zechariah at a “one-in-a-million” moment in the old man’s life. There were far too many priests in the land for all of them to work at the temple all the time, so they were divided into twenty-four orders or courses. A single course of priests only served at the temple for eight days every six months as well as during the great week-long festivals. Most priests did not even live in Jerusalem. When it was time for a course of priests to serve, the individual tasks were assigned by lot. Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the holy place just outside the curtain of the most holy place.

Because there were about 20,000 priests, it was rare that any priest would burn incense more than once in his lifetime, if ever. This was a special day in Zechariah’s life, but God would make it unspeakably unique for the old man. As special as this opportunity was, no priest would dare to bask in the moment. He was on holy ground. He burned the incense, uttered his prayers and got out. This is why the worshippers gathered outside were perplexed at how long Zechariah remained in the holy place. That was the danger of letting old men burn incense. Who was going to go in there and drag him out?

### **B. What’s In a Name?**

Zechariah’s name meant “remembered of God”. He may not have uttered a prayer for a son in years. He was surely reconciled to the fact that he and Elizabeth would never have children. The prayers that he uttered as he burned incense were for the nation, but at this spiritually-charged moment, perhaps, he could not help but to pray one more time for a son. Of course, a prayer does not have to be recent for God to answer it. In any event, when the angel announced the coming birth of a child, he presents that birth as the answer to Zechariah’s prayer: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son ...” (verse 13).

God remembered Zechariah’s prayers for both a son and for the nation. The conception of a child to aged parents was a powerful statement of God’s grace. Barrenness was no sin in God’s eyes, but it was a

social disgrace among the Jews. In verse 25, Elizabeth would interpret her pregnancy as God having “taken away my disgrace among the people.” The child’s name would also be significant. John, “the grace of Jehovah,” described the historical dispensation at hand that John would introduce, but it also had a touching meaning for his mother. What’s in a Name? Sometimes, the hand of God Himself.

We live in such a process and results-oriented culture that it is tempting to fool ourselves into believing that we can actually bring God’s work to pass simply by good planning and hard work. Preachers study and deliver their sermons. Church leaders set goals and activate workers to pursue them. All of that is useful, until we lock into preconceived expectations of what the results must look like. If the results are the ones we predetermine, we have succeeded. If not, somewhere we have failed. We become so methodical that the human crowds out the divine. Sometimes, God has to thwart our plans just to remind us Who is in charge. It is good to be dutiful and conscientious in God’s work, but we must not lose sight of the wonder of it all - that God is powerfully moving in ways we do not control.

When God does choose to work through people, what kind of vessels does He prefer to use?

## **II. God’s Ways**

### **A. God Selects Imperfect Human Vessels**

If God worked only through flawless people, He would not leave Himself many options. Zechariah and Elizabeth, this couple that Luke identifies as “upright in the sight of God,” would have been the brunt of whispers by old women and the harsh judgments of certain rabbis who would equate Elizabeth’s barrenness with God’s displeasure. In fact, her barrenness was grounds for Zechariah to have divorced her according to some rabbis. Of course, the harshness of these rabbinical schools would not render the old couple guilty of anything. Still, as righteous as the old priest was, Zechariah had his foibles.

Zechariah questioned God’s promise, and God rendered him speechless for a few months. Others had questioned God in the past without such severe consequences. Moses did not see himself as adequately articulate to speak to Pharaoh as the voice from the burning bush commanded. God sent his brother with him as a mouthpiece. Gideon asked God for a sign to authenticate what were already rather straightforward instructions. God honored his request. Perhaps, it was because Zechariah was a priest - perhaps, it was because the angel appeared in a holy place where no false messenger could appear – for whatever reason, God determined that six months of silence would only serve to benefit Zechariah.

### **B. God Delights in Working through Meek, God-Sensitive People**

Zechariah and Elizabeth “were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” Zechariah was not as arrogant as many of his priestly peers. Another priest in these spiritually barren days might have been filled with pride over the honor of burning incense at the temple. But, Zechariah recognized that these things were beyond his control. He served with motives that pleased God, with humility and wonder, not simply as a religious duty or a personal honor.

Upon becoming pregnant, Elizabeth entered seclusion for five months. Certainly, this was a time of prayer and reflection. After her seclusion, she was armed not only with the joy of impending motherhood, but also with a deep awareness of what God was bringing about not only by her own child

but especially by the child of her young cousin, Mary. Later in this chapter, Mary comes to Elizabeth's home to visit her when the older woman blesses the younger one:

42... "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" - Luke 1:42-45

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were obedient and deeply conscious of the presence of God at a time when many people around them were just going through the motions of religion. Is it any wonder that God delights in bringing His purposes to pass through people such as these? He still delights in using people like Zechariah and Elizabeth. Such people would never take credit for what God might do through them. They always divert glory away from themselves and towards God where it belongs.

God works most efficiently through humble human vessels. It is most pleasant for us to present ourselves to God in humility. But, if He is willing to gently steer a reasonably meek man like Zechariah, He can certainly humble his more stubborn children. But, the principle of value to us seems to be that God delights in our cooperative, child-like and wonder-filled demeanors.

### **III. God's Workings**

#### **A. God Works by Empowering His People to Serve Him**

The notion of people in the service of God presents an interesting paradox. We must give ourselves completely to His work, and yet, we are not able to do His work unless He enables us to do it. The Holy Spirit brings human effort and divine power together. The resurrected Jesus would command His disciples to bear witness to all they had seen. They were to preach and to put their lives on the line. But, before He ascended back to heaven, Jesus told them first to return to Jerusalem and wait. "I am going to send what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). Jesus was speaking of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Without God's power, their efforts would prove futile and their survival in the world would be short-lived.

John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. His was a unique role in a unique circumstance. He was to prepare God's people for the coming of *Messiah*, something no man could possibly bring to pass without divine help. God reveals a different pattern for empowering His church today. Believers on Christ now receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit as a gift when they become a part of Christ's Body by faith, in repentance over their sins as they are baptized into Him.

#### **B. God's Work Is Augmented by Human Purity**

John was called to simple, non-indulgent living. He never drank. He would live in the wilderness, clothed in simple attire and sustained by wilderness foods. He was untouched by the evils of the culture and independent of the world's enticements. This was his calling from birth. We do not share John's unique prophetic office in John's unique place in time, but our regard for holiness, for contentment and for a certain simplicity of life still greatly enhance our participation in God's work of bringing His kingdom into our world. Without the pursuit of personal holiness, we cannot be effective instruments of God. We can only hinder the work of the Spirit of holiness in us when we are not mindful about remaining holy.

... 14As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." - 1 Peter 1:14-16

## **C. God's Work Is a Ministry of Reconciliation**

Concerning John's ministry, the angel, Gabriel said:

... <sup>16</sup>Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." - Luke 1:16, 17

To turn the people's hearts to God, John must also restore the hearts of the nation to the hearts of their faithful ancestors. The heart of a spiritually-barren nation no longer beat for God as did the hearts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Elijah. And, only when hearts in Israel beat with a common allegiance for the righteousness of God could those same hearts ever be restored to one another. This is still an important truth for every community of faith. Only when people are restored to common ground with God can they have any real basis to enjoy common ground with one another.

The Holy Spirit's work through John was to point people to Jesus. He would direct his own disciples to Jesus, telling them, "He must become greater. I must become less" (John 3:30). Directing people to Jesus was the Spirit's ministry through Paul and the other Apostles: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:20). Reconciliation is still the work of the Holy Spirit.

There are things that God must bring about by His own hand. There are other projects in which He gives important roles to people. We want to be in the ball park where God can use us. What do we learn from Elizabeth and Zechariah? Are you available to God? Are you meek enough to do whatever He requires? Are you humble enough to shun all glory for yourself? Are you holy? It's not enough to just desire to be used of God. Are you presenting yourself to Him as the kind of vessel He requires?

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