

THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

In this lesson we will be discussing the background behind John the baptizer and then we will focus on his work as he proclaimed the coming of the coming of the Lord. The best place to learn the most details about his background is from Luke 1.

Luke 1:5 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.

Here we have John's father and mother named, but I want you notice what Curtis Cates tells us about Zacharias:

As the population grew and especially as the number of priests multiplied during David's day (1 Chron. 24:7-18), since the priests were of the family of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, who did not go to war and consequently were not depleted in numbers because of war, David divided the priest into twenty-four courses, or bodies, each of whom would serve one week. Each course would serve twice during the year, making forty-eight weeks. In addition, all the priests would serve during three weeks of the year. After the Babylonian captivity, the priests were again divided into courses; the practice persisted until the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans (A.D. 70).

Zacharias' course was Abijah, the eighth in the list (1 Chron. 24:10); thus he would serve eight weeks into the Jewish year, which began in April (not counting the week of the Passover) and would serve six months later.

Note: one can calculate the general time of the Lord's birth by figuring 1. the week of Zacharias' service, 2. the week of Pentecost, in which he would also serve, 3. giving Zacharias time to get home (several days), the last of June (approximately), 4. adding six months until Mary's conception, the last of December (Luke 1:26), and 5. adding the nine months until Christ's birth (the last of September, likely). Or, it could have been during the second round of services that [Zacharias] was serving during the year, making Christ's birth six months later, or March. The evidence favors the early date.

Luke 1:6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

These two remind me of Abraham and Sarah who were also righteous before God who struggled with having a child. Zacharias and his wife kept the Law of Moses with all its ordinances. These two are great example of a godly couple.

Luke 1:8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

According to the Law of Moses, this burning of the incense was done before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice on the altar that stood before the veil which separated the Holy place from the Holy of Holies. The rising incense symbolized the prayers of the people ascending to God.

Luke 1:11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ "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."

As we will see, this angel is Gabriel. I can just imagine how startled Zacharias was. There he was concentrating on performing his duty and then all of sudden an angel appears. That would be enough to trouble anyone. While Gabriel tries calm Zacharias down, I have a feeling that it made him more anxious the more Gabriel talked because he was telling him wonderful things about his long awaited son.

It should have helped his nerves some knowing that the angle was not there to punish him. I can also imagine how overwhelmed with awe he was when he found out that his prayers were being answered and that his son was going to play an important role in the lives of his fellow Jews.

His name was to be John, which means "Jehovah is gracious." He was going to bring great joy to his parents and to many people. John was to be raised with what seems to be similar to the Nazirite vow. The reason I say similar, is because many of the restrictions of the Nazirite vow are not listed (Num. 6).

John would be filled with the Holy Sprit while in his mother's womb. This does not necessarily mean that he was inspired from the womb, but probably was done to show that he was sanctified and chosen by God to carry out the task of being the forerunner of Christ. As David proclaimed:

Psalm 22:9 But You *are* He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust *while* on My mother's breasts. ¹⁰ I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You *have been* My God.

Gabriel also told him that John's work would include turning many of his people to God. Talking about having a high standard for your child, John would have a lot to live up to. Gabriel is not teaching reincarnation when he said he would come in the spirit and power

of Elijah. He was saying that he would resemble Elijah life and work. It is with this thought in mind that Malachi made his prophecy in:

Malachi 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ⁶ And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

Jesus confirms that John fulfilled Malachi prophecy (Mt. 11:14).

Luke 1:18 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." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ "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." ²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. ²² 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. ²³ And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

Without being in Zacharias shoes it is difficult understand how he could doubt Gabriel's message. After all, he was standing in the Holy place with angel before him. Our text suggest that the reason he was struggling so much with what the angel said was because he was so old and his wife was advanced in years, which means that she beyond the normal child bearing years. His doubt was met with a consequence. He would not be able to speak until the day John was born, which in itself was a sign that what the angel was saying was true.

The people started getting worried about Zacharias because it was taking him much longer to perform his duty. Besides the extra time spent speaking to Gabriel, I would imagine he lingered in the Holy place for some time trying to make sense of what had just happened to him. When he did finally come out, the people surmised from his lack of speech, his gesturing, and probably the look on his face that something special happened.

While our text does not come right out and say it, it appears that Zacharias also lost his hearing. In verse 22, the Greek word behind speechless can mean loss of speech and loss of hearing. Also, verse 62 implies that he could not hear because the people had to make signs to him. The only reason they would have to make signs was if he could not hear. Though unable to speak or hear, he continued to carry out his duty and then went home.

Luke 1:24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, ²⁵ "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among people."

While we can only speculate, why do you think Elizabeth hid herself for the first 5 months of her pregnancy? Based on her response in verse 25, she felt ashamed that she had not been able to bear a child. Perhaps she was concerned that she would miscarry, which would have made her feel more ashamed because of how the people thought back then, so she hid those 5 months to make sure her pregnancy was going well. Whatever the reason, she was very thankful to the Lord that she would finally get to have a son and take away her disgrace among her people.

Luke 1:26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored *one*, the Lord *is* with you; blessed *are* you among women!" ²⁹ But when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³² "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" ³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.*

Since we are focusing on John's background, I will let our text speak for itself. Notice what that angel says next:

Luke 1:36 "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷ "For with God nothing will be impossible." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Elizabeth and Mary were related. Gabriel's point was that if God could cause Elizabeth to have a child, then He is not going to have any problems giving her child though she is a virgin.

Luke 1:39 Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰ and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed *are* you among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ "But why *is* this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ "For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. ⁴⁵ "Blessed *is* she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."

As soon as Mary greeted Elizabeth, John leaped in her womb and she received a revelation from the Holy Spirit. As far we know, Elizabeth had no idea that Mary was pregnant much less the details behind her pregnancy, but the Holy Spirit revealed this to her and she felt honored to have Mary with her. Once Elizabeth said what was revealed to her, Mary begins speak great praises to God.

Luke 1:46 And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. ⁴⁸ For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. ⁵⁰ And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts. ⁵² He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly. ⁵³ He has filled *the* hungry with good things, And *the* rich He has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of *His* mercy, ⁵⁵ As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." ⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house.

Luke 1:57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. ⁵⁸ When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ 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. ⁶⁰ His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." ⁶² So they made signs to his father -- what he would have him called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he spoke, praising God. ⁶⁵ Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ 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.

As predicted by Gabriel the people were rejoicing at John's birth because they knew He had made it possible for her conceive in her old age. Circumcision was always done on 8th day even if it fell on the Sabbath. I we recently saw on a video, medically the 8th day is the best day to circumcise because the blood clotting factor is at the highest it will ever be on the 8th day insuring that that baby does not bleed to death.

Anytime a person goes against the custom of the day, it is bound to turn heads. The people could not understand why Elizabeth would name him John since no one in her family was named John. This so unusually that they wanted to check with Zacharias to make sure, and he confirmed it by writing it down. This really got their curiosity up, but I bet really shocked them when Zacharias was able to talk and hear now.

After being silent all that time, he was ready to praise God for what He had done. This great event became the talk of the hill country. They knew that God was about to make

things happen starting with John and so the uncertainty of all caused many of them to be afraid. All they could do was to wait and see what God had planned for John.

Luke 1:67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: ⁶⁸ "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, ⁶⁹ And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David, ⁷⁰ As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who *have been* since the world began, ⁷¹ That we should be saved from our enemies And from the hand of all who hate us, ⁷² To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³ The oath which He swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ To grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, ⁷⁵ In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. ⁷⁶ "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, ⁷⁷ To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, ⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; ⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace." ⁸⁰ So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Zacharias being filled with the Holy Spirit both praises God and prophesies the future about his son and the coming Messiah. He points out how John would be one the greatest prophets, which was confirmed by Jesus (Lk. 7:28). He would be the forerunner for Christ and would teach the way of salvation by remission of sins, which exactly what John did as he went around teaching the people to repent and baptized for the forgiveness of their sins (Mk. 1:4).

Finally, we get a quick summary of how John grew up and became strong in the spirit, and how he remained in the dessert until the day he came forth preaching about the coming kingdom and the coming Messiah.

Now that we have taken a close look a John's background, let's begin examining his ministry.

As we have learned, John was to be the forerunner for Christ. His work was foretold by two different prophets: Isaiah (Isa. 40:3; Mt. 3:3) and Malachi (Mal. 3:1). Mark's account mentions both of these prophetic utterances and gives us a summary of John's work (Mk. 1:1-6).

There are a couple characteristic traits about John that stand out and are worth emulating.

1. He was a humble man.

Being humble is hard for some achieve, but if we want to be pleasing to God we must learn to be humble (Jam. 4:6). While John was a spiritual giant who not afraid to speak the truth, he knew what his mission was and he never allowed pride or the pursuit of

power overtake him. We can see his humble mindset in several passages: (Jn. 1:19-28; Jn. 3:26-30). [Discuss his humility in these verses.] Since John was such a dedicated humble servant of God, Jesus had nothing but high praise for him (Mt. 11:7-15). Jesus also confirms that we must learn to be humble like John in order to make it into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 18:1-4).

2. He boldly proclaimed God's truth.

John did not try and sugarcoat his message. He said it like it was. Many would label him as being too stern today, but he got his message across. Read and discuss Mt. 3:1-10 and Lk. 3:10-14. John also rebuked Herod about his unlawful marriage (Mt. 14:4; Mk. 6:17-18).

Preachers should learn from John not to water down God's truth no matter what the consequence may be. Every Christian should learn that there is nothing wrong with teaching those around you the truth with boldness. Rebuking people for their sins is not an ugly thing to do. It shows people that you love them because you do not want them to be an enemy of God and have to face the wrath of God. The Word of God teaches us that we should be willing to rebuke those who sin and encourage them to turn away from their sin: (Lk. 17:3; 2 Tim. 4:2; Tit. 1:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:19-20).

John had to face the consequences of his rebuke to Herod because he was thrown into prison for it (Mk. 6:17-29). [Discuss these verses]. While John's ministry was short, he accomplished his goal. Though he was locked up and beheaded, he would have done it again because he knew it was honor to serve the Lord and to be the forerunner for the coming Messiah.

In a like manner, we should consider it an honor when we serve the Lord. When we proclaim His truth in word and in deed, we can know that it is worth it no matter what the consequence of life may be because we know that we been given the promise of eternal life in heaven as reward for our commitment to humbly serving the Lord.