

Intro: As we focus on the Christmas story, Matthew and Luke present Christ's birth in 6 scenes that mostly involve Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus.

- * But the story begins with 3 others- Zachariah and Elizabeth, who were Mary's close relatives living near Jerusalem, and the son they gave birth to, who was John the Baptist.
- * This account starts about 15 months before Christ was born, and the Holy Spirit made this the longest scene by far in the overall story, because it was the wakeup call for Israel to recognize that the coming of their Messiah was right on their doorstep.
- * We will look at this part of the story in 3 main points.

I. The start -- GABRIEL REVEALS HIMSELF TO ZACHARIAH. (Luke 1:5-25)

A. In v5-7 WE MEET THE PEOPLE. (5-7- read) Note 4 details about this couple.

1. As a priest, Zachariah was to marry a godly girl; and he obeyed the Law so well, that he married a priest's daughter, who would compliment his position before God.

2. They were "upright". They were not sinlessly perfect, but they were fully obedient to the details of Moses Law, and God was pleased with their daily walk. (our goal)

- This is key- because in that time, much of Israel's priesthood was self-righteous, hypocritical, and sinful.

3. They never had children, and were much too old to have them.

- Children were highly cherished by the Jews, and they believed barrenness was God's judgment for hidden sin, so barren couples were often shunned, and worse, these 2 devout Jews, lived with the pain of never having kids or grandkids of their own.

4. This trial they lived with their whole marriage, was given by God, so they could be blessed and used in a remarkable way, to introduce the Messiah to Israel.

** They teach us- that God intends to use our suffering to bring Him honor and glory.

* Our responsibility is to patiently and faithfully trust and follow Him, and let God work.

B. THE SITUATION. (8-10- read)

- * Each of Israel's priests served at the Temple, twice a year, for 8 days, and could be selected (a given day) for the privilege of offering incense during the 2 daily sacrifices.
- * Zachariah was chosen, and would enter the holy place which was near the holy of holies, light the incense, pray, then back out reverently from this awesome (scary) task.
- * This was done while the people were praying at the Temple entrance, and the incense pictured that our prayers are like perfume to God. God loves it when we pray.

C. ZACHARIAH WAS SURPRISED. (11-12- read) 3 reasons Zachariah was afraid --

- 1st- Angels were awesome looking, and most always brought fear on those who saw them.
- 2nd- It had been 400 years since God spoke to Israel through a sign, vision, prophet, or angel.
- 3rd- Jewish tradition said- when the incense was offered, 2 people stood invisibly by the alter, an angel on the left, and God Himself on the right.
 - Here, the angel appeared on the right, (God's side), and God told Moses in Ex. 33 that no one could see God and live, so Zachariah may have thought he was about to die.

D. GABRIEL GAVE THIS GODLY PRIEST - A MESSAGE. (13-17- read)

- * This was the greatest news Zachariah and Elizabeth could receive, that finally, she would have a child. Note 2 truths.

1. All their life, they had prayed for this so constantly and consistently, that the angel called their prayers-- ONE PRAYER. ("Your prayer")
2. God made them wait for this blessing until it seemed there was no hope, so He could demonstrate His power, and bring them and others to know they could fully trust God.

App- Q- (Mac) God answers consistent, earnest, trusting prayer, not passing whims, so we will learn the difference between what's important and what's not.

E. ZACHARIAH'S REACTION. (18-ff)

Notice 2 steps.

1. Zachariah doubted the angel's news. (18- read)

- Zachariah was a godly man, but he wasn't perfect, so he asked a doubting question that gave the excuse - that they were too old for this to happen. **Why do this?**

a. Zachariah had prayed for so long with no response, that he forgot that God was still present with His people, and He would keep His promise to send their Messiah.

b. Zachariah forgot about God's power. Centuries ago, God started the nation by giving Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age, even when they doubted.

Lsn: Bible history proves that God answers prayer, and can overcome human limitations.

* This doesn't mean we selfishly get what we want, it means we graciously get God's will.

2. The angel scolded Zachariah for not trusting God's promise. (19-22- read)

- When we distrust God's Word, we accuse God of being untruthful, so to chasten him for his doubtful question, God made this the last thing Zachariah would say for a while.

- This was highly frustrating for a priest, because it temporarily cost him 3 great privileges.

a. He couldn't close this important time with prayer, before the people outside.

b. He couldn't talk about this openly with anyone, especially his wife.

c. He couldn't preach of this at the local synagogue, where he pastored. (substitute)

Lesson- God's plans will happen regardless of what man does, but the shame is- Zachariah's doubt cost him the blessing of openly spreading this good news.

Sum- (v23-25- read) Zachariah took this promise to his wife, and soon it was fulfilled.

Q- "Now with child, Elizebeth determined never to appear in public again to be shunned, until she could appear noticeably with child, and be praised." (Phil)

NOW- In the meantime, Mary was visited by Gabriel, (so was Joseph), and Mary came to visit Zachariah and Elizebeth to confirm the message given to her.

She stayed 3 months, then returned to Nazareth.

So here, let's jump ahead about nine months to Luke 1: vs 57 where we see----

II. THE ARRIVAL OF JOHN. (Luke 1:57-80) >>>>>>

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* 4 important details to notice.

A. GOD GRACIOUSLY FULFILLED HIS PROMISE. (57- 58 read)

- * Remember that God hadn't spoken in a miraculous way to Isreal, in 400 years, so His promise to send their Messiah and his forerunner, seemed all but lost.
- * But God kept His promise and sent them both, and John's birth, 6 months before Jesus, supported the promise Mary received, that she would soon bear the Messiah.
- * This elderly couple learned- God is faithful to keep His Word, even if it seems impossible.
 - And God will care for us through our trouble, and answer our prayers to fit His will, and make all things work together for our good. Because God never fails.

*** And notice- This couple and those around them saw all this as GOD'S MERCY.**

- * This was significant because at this time, Israel was oppressed by Rome, and the Jews were pridefully angry about it, because they were God's chosen people, and God had promised to give them their land, and a great Messiah to lead them---,
 - and they believed God owed them, and they deserved a much better life than what they were getting, (like people today)
- * But here, because this couple was righteous, they humbly viewed John as something undeserved that was given to them by God's mercy.
- * And John the Baptist's ministry was based on that same kind of humility, as he sought to turn Israel to humbly submit to Christ for who He was, rather than reject Him for not being the earthly king they arrogantly wanted Him to be.

APP- Christmas is about God's great mercy to save undeserving sinners, and no one can be saved without humbly embracing that truth.

B. THEY OBEDIENTLY NAMED JOHN. (59-63-read)

- * Jewish tradition said the firstborn son was to take the father's name, out of respect.
- * But Elizabeth contradicted those around her to obey God, and she named him JOHN.
- * The ultimate decision was always the husbands, and when Zachariah was asked about it, he agreed with his wife and wrote-- "HIS NAME IS JOHN".
- * **This was shocking** because the religious leaders frowned on violating tradition because they thought it would make God angry, and bring judgment on the nation.
- * But this couple, standing in front of the priests who were dedicating this baby boy, shunned tradition and put God's Word first in order to obey God.

* **Also notice the significance of all 3 of their names.**

- * In ancient times a name was to describe what the parents wanted the child to be.
- * Joseph was to name Mary's child- "JESUS" because it means "Savior".
- * And here, "Zachariah" means- "Jehovah has remembered".
"Elizabeth" means- "the promise of God", and "John" means- "God is gracious".
- * All 3 names together displayed what God was doing- because in sending John and Jesus, God remembered His promise to Israel, to bring His gracious salvation to the world.

(God fulfilled their births and their names)

Note- John was not named after his father, because his life was not to glorify Zachariah.

- * God fashioned John to live in humility, and put all his attention on the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Finally -- THE GREAT SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS EVENT FOR ISRAEL. (Various verses)

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- * This isn't just a cute little story about a wonderful miracle. (Too often we miss the big picture)
- * In this event, God was doing 3 crucial things for Israel.

A. GOD DEMONSTRATED HIS POWER TO THE NATION. (64-66 read)

* Here, God did 2 miracles- He gave a child to an elderly couple, and took Zachariah's voice and restored it when He obeyed the Lord. These miracles were to alert Israel of 2 things.

1. After centuries of silence, God was working in Israel again, to fulfill His promises.
2. This baby would 1 day introduce Jesus of Nazareth to the nation, who did multitudes of miracles, to fulfill what OT prophecy said Messiah would do, to prove who He was.

B. GOD DISPLAYED HIS PLAN TO ISRAEL, THROUGH A GODLY PRIEST.

* A priest was a significant person to reveal the coming of John and Jesus. Note 4 things.

1. **Zachariah had superiors to answer to, and duties to perform.** Being a righteous priest, those above him could vouch for his character, and verify that he would never lie.
2. **He was also a reliable shepherd in his synagogue,** who taught, interpreted scripture, counseled, and judged legal matters, which made him trustworthy in his community.
3. **He was faithful to his wife,** at a time when religious leaders taught divorce for any reason.
- A typical priest would have divorced his barren wife and married another, rather than suffer the shame of being childless, but Zachariah was faithful to his wife.
4. **Priests represented the people before God-** so God used Zachariah to introduce the ultimate Priest, the Lord Jesus, who alone can represent us before God.

Sum: All these things about this godly priest, Zachariah, were a wakeup call to the Jews, and especially the priesthood, that this event was God's doing, and they needed to pay close attention to it.

C. GOD GAVE ZACHARIAH PROPHECY - JOHN FULFILLED. (15-17, 80. don't read)

* Earlier in vs 15-17, (80), The angel gave Zachariah 5 details about what John would be.

1. Unlike Israel's view of greatness, John would be GREAT in the Lord's sight.

- Because John was a regular guy, the people followed him, but the elite religionists thought John was strange (dressed and ate weird, secluded himself, wouldn't give his name).
- But he became great in the nation, and the people believed he was a true prophet, and The Lord Jesus said that John was the greatest man to ever live up to that time.

2. The angel also said John would take the Nazarite vow, which meant he would abstain from several normal things, to focus completely on his spiritual work, which he did.

3. John would be filled with the Spirit, even from conception. (saved in the womb)

- Vs 80 mentions John's childhood (rd). John's ministry and preaching proved he had walked with God in his childhood, learned OT prophecy, and the spiritual truth about salvation.

4. John became the man who presented the Messiah. (17a, 76-79) (Mal. 3:1, 4:5-6)

- Malachi prophesied that a prophet like Elijah would show up and introduce the Messiah to the nation..., So Israel and its leaders constantly watched for such a man.
- And when John (who was like Elijah) began preaching that Messiah was near, the populace flocked to Him; And as promised, he presented the Messiah, when he baptized Jesus.

5. John would turn many in Israel back to the Lord. (16-17)

- John fulfilled this, as he baptized multitudes of converts to the Messiah.
- In time, most of them proved to be phonies, as the populace rejected Jesus at the cross.
- But when Christ resurrected, and God's Spirit came at Pentecost--, this prophecy began to be fulfilled, as tens of thousands came to Christ. (those baptized by John)

Point- 30 years after John's birth, he proved to be exactly what the angel told Zachariah, And John fulfilling these prophecies was a wakeup call to Israel, for them to believe John, and fully embrace Jesus as their Messiah.

Summary- Much about Jesus' birth took place in obscurity.

He was born in a stable in a small village to unknown common people

* But Luke 1 shows God alerted Israel about Christ's coming with John's miraculous birth, to very believable people, in plenty of time for Israel to prepare for what Gabriel told them.

And Note- The religious leaders closely watched their spiritual teachers.

- Zachariah pastored near Jerusalem. And later when John and Jesus began their ministries, the leaders no doubt checked temple's birth records to see where these guys came from.

- And then they accused Jesus of being illegitimate because His records said He didn't have an earthly father, only a legal father. (Jn 6)

- But they could not deny the Temple records of John's miraculous birth to this elderly priest and his wife, who was one of them.

* When it was time for Christ to come, John's miraculous birth and life was a significant sign to keep this spiritually asleep nation from failure---,

as it displayed God's glory and showed God was about to keep His promises and reveal their promised Messiah.

* But most of the religious establishment was so selfish and sinful, they refused to bow to the truth that came from John and Jesus, and they crucified their Messiah, to maintain their hold on Israel.

* **But the great news is-** Christ's coming means salvation for all who believe.

Have you believed? The truth is--- God is holy, we are sinners, we need a Savior, we must repent and yield to Christ in faith.