

The Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-80) & The Annunciation to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

The Birth and Circumcision of John (Luke 1:57-66)

Three months had passed since Mary came to visit Elizabeth (something we learned about last week). And now:

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. (Luke 1:58)

Notice that the joy Elizabeth's friends and relatives expressed was not merely in the fact that she gave birth to her first child. No, their joy was in God's mercy – mercy that demonstrated itself in allowing her to conceive a child. This serves as an example of where we ought to find our greatest joy. When the LORD blesses you with something, thank God – not only for the blessing He gave you, but for his mercy and love that moved him to give it.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah (Luke 1:59)

Circumcision was an important custom for Old Testament believers – one commanded by God himself. It was a sign of God's covenant (his "promise") to Abraham and his descendants. And what promise was that? You can read about it in Genesis 17, but basically it was the promise that God would be their God, and they would be his people. It was the promise that God would bless Abraham and allow his descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. It was the promise that Abraham would have a special descendant through whom all nations would be blessed. In Hebrew, the word for offspring is "seed" – and circumcision marked the place where the "seed" of Abraham would come from; so that all future generations of Israelites might remember the promise God made concerning the Savior and their special relationship with Him. Zechariah's song of praise will remind us of this the very point.

The custom was to circumcise a child on the eighth day after his birth (as Abraham commanded) and to name the child at that time. Even though any Israelite (male or female) was allowed to perform the circumcision, usually the father of the child did it – pronouncing his name and saying a blessing and prayer over him. It seems that, because Zechariah could not speak, another relative did the honors.

But then it happened –

they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." (Luke 1:59-60)

We can just imagine the family argument this caused – as the family was convinced that the boy should be named in honor of Zechariah.

⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." (Luke 1: 62-63)

When Zechariah wrote this – showing obedience to the angel's command -

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. (Luke 1:65)

Yes, what was this child going to be? Zechariah's song of praise would answer that very question, but before we answer that question, I want you all to look ahead in our text and answer a different question:

For what did Zechariah praise God?

[Answer: Not merely for the birth of his son, but for the salvation God was about to accomplish. This was more important to him than anything else.]

Zechariah's Praise to God for His Salvation (Luke 1:67-75)

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. (Luke 1:67-68)

Notice that Zechariah's praise is not merely that of a father rejoicing in the birth of his son. The Holy Spirit inspired his praise. God was telling all who heard – and would later read – Zechariah's words about the LORD's love and faithfulness in sending a Savior.

The LORD is described as "the God of Israel." It is important to note that Zechariah is not talking about the political nation of Israel. He is talking about spiritual Israel – that is, all those who look to God in repentance and faith for the forgiveness of sins. The Apostle Paul makes this differentiation in his letter to the Romans, where he writes:

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. . . . ⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. (Romans 9:6-8)

And who are the "children of the promise" who are regarded as true children of Abraham and Israel in God's sight?

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (Roman 4:16)

In other words, if you look to Jesus in faith for the forgiveness of sins, God considers you a child of Abraham – a true Israelite – one of His own dearly loved children. Zechariah's song of praise is about God fulfilling the promises he made to your people. And which people are they: Germans? No, rather believers in God's promise, regardless of race or nationality

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people (Luke 1:68)

To redeem means "to buy back." What did the LORD buy us back from and what price did he pay? St. Peter tells us:

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

In other word, God has redeemed us from our sins and sinful way of life. He purchased us for himself – paying the most costly price imaginable: the life of His Son. Realize this. Treasure how much God loves you and show your thankfulness by living a life of obedience to his commands.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago) (Luke 1:69-70)

A horn is a symbol for strength, being an animal's weapon against its enemy. Here it means the person who has the power to save us from our enemies. Listen to what King David said about the LORD, some 700 years before John's birth.

"The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; ³ my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior . . . (2 Samuel 22:2-3)

God's salvation is not some novel idea. It was prophesied by every prophet from Moses to Malachi. The whole Old Testament is a testimony to the coming Savior who will give us:

⁷¹ *salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us* (Luke 1:71)

Who are the enemies Zechariah is talking about? The Romans? This is what many of the Jews thought. But such thinking would be wrong. Jesus did not come to establish a political kingdom – as he himself said:

"My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36)

No, just as Jesus' kingdom would be spiritual, the enemies he would defeat would be spiritual. And who are they? The devil and his demons, this evil world and its siren song to sin, and our own sinful flesh. These are our greatest enemies who keep us ignorant of God and under the yoke of sin. These are the enemies that Jesus came to defeat in order

⁷² *to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,* ⁷³ *the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,* (Luke 1:72-75)

What is the covenant – the promise – that God swore to Abraham and all the patriarchs? We find it in Genesis 22, where we read:

"I swear by myself, declares the LORD . . . ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed . . . " (Genesis 22:16-18)

The promise is that of a Savior – through whom all nations would be blessed. This Savior would defeat all the spiritual enemies of God's people. Because of this Savior, Abraham's descendants would be beyond count. Remember what we said earlier: God considers everyone who believes a child of Abraham and under this promise.

And why did God send his Son to rescue us from our enemies? Zechariah says:

to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:74-75)

According to verses 74 and 75, why did God rescue us from our spiritual enemies?

[*Answer* – He saved us so that we can serve him in holiness and righteousness – that we can lovingly and joyfully follow his will as Adam and Eve did before they fell into sin.]

Zechariah's prophesies concerning his son (Luke 1:76-80)

Zechariah now turns his attention to his son.

⁷⁶ *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,* (Luke 1:76)

This is also in fulfillment of the Lord's promise through the prophets of Malachi and Isaiah, through whom, the LORD said:

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."
(Malachi 3:1)

³ *A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD"*
(Isaiah 40:3)

Zechariah continues:

for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, (Luke 1:76-77)

According to verse 77, how would John prepare the people for the LORD's coming?

[*Answer:* By giving them the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. John's message is the same message that every faithful pastor preaches today: repent of your sins and look to God for forgiveness. God is faithful and forgives all your sins because of the work Christ Jesus came to do.]

And why was John chosen to preach forgiveness and salvation? What moved God to do this? Zechariah says it's . . .

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:76-79)

In the Bible, God uses darkness as a symbol of spiritual ignorance, sin and death. Light is a symbol of revelation, the knowledge of God's love that Christ would bring, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness that comes by faith and eternal life. Consider Jesus' own words concerning this, which really expound on Zechariah's prophecy:

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. . . . This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." (John 3:16, 19-21)

Thus ends Zechariah's wonderful song of praise and prophecy concerning his son. But there is one more verse to consider before we move on to the account of Joseph and that is this:

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. (Luke 1:80)

Notice that John not only grew physically, he also "became strong in the spirit" – in other words He grew in faith. But how did that growth take place? Did Zechariah and Elizabeth just let John run wild, trusting that the LORD would "zap" him with knowledge? Definitely not! No, John "became strong in the spirit" because his parents fulfilled their role of instructing him with God's Word, as St. Paul says:

*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.
(Romans 10:17)*

How can we, like John, grow and become strong in the Spirit?

[*Answer:* St. Paul answers the question for us. Faith comes from the Word. In order to grow strong in the spirit we should first of all pray that the LORD send his Holy Spirit to us, and then read the Word. Why? Because the Word – together with the sacraments - is the tool God uses to grow our faith and make us strong in the Spirit.]

Joseph's Dilemma (Matthew 1:18-19)

We now turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew, where we read:

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

We don't know how or when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. Most commentators think that it was after Mary returned from visiting Elizabeth. She would have been three months pregnant by now, and it would have started to show.

We can imagine that Mary tried to explain to Joseph about the angel's annunciation and point to her relative Elizabeth as proof that the LORD was doing these things. But that left Joseph even more confused. You see:

Joseph her husband was a righteous man (Matthew 1:19)

That is, he too believed in the coming Messiah and lived a life of faith and obedience to God. He knew the Scriptures, "But," he thought, "Why would the LORD choose Mary? Could it be true? But how?" All rational thought told him that Mary had cheated on him. The baby is clearly not his. But even if what Mary claimed was true – that her child is of the Holy Spirit – what would his role be? Joseph didn't know what to think or believe. After mulling it over he decided that he

did not want to expose [Mary] to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

Joseph could have been vindictive, and in righteous anger accused her of adultery – a crime that was punishable by death. But, out of love for her, he decided to divorce her quietly – to give her a certificate of divorce that really didn't state any reason. People might then assume that he was to blame for the divorce – that he "lost love" for her. They might then assume that Mary's child was his. This, then, would protect the life and reputation of Mary and her son.

How does Joseph serve as an example when someone sins against us?

[Answer – Joseph didn't seek revenge or see how badly he could make the other person pay. His actions were all based in love for the benefit of Mary. So too, when we are sinned against, we should pray that God gives us the strength to forgive as he has forgiven us and act in love towards the person who hurt us.]

The Angel visits Joseph (Matthew 1:20-23)

²⁰ *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:20)*

The angel confirms that Mary told the truth. She did not cheat on him. Mary is indeed bearing the Messiah. By calling Joseph the son of David, the angel reminded Joseph of the promise that God made to David:

¹² *When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. (2 Samuel 7:12-14)*

Not only is Mary's child the Messiah, the angel tells Joseph the role God wanted him to play in his life. He was to take Mary home as his wife – providing, protecting and loving her as he promised.

²¹ *She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1: 21-23; cf. Isaiah 7:14)*

What a promise! The Messiah has come. In Mary's womb was Immanuel – the God-man – who became like one of us to save us. God himself was ready to walk with human feet, with a human heart beating inside of him. He came to be with us to save us so that, through faith in him, we might forever be with Him where He is.

Joseph obeys (Matthew 1:24-25)

²⁴ *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25)*

Joseph immediately obeyed the angel, thereby showing his faith. His actions protected both Mary and Jesus. Mary would not be considered an adulterous woman and Jesus would not be called a "bastard" child. God provided a human father to love and protect his son in a way only a father can. Moreover Jesus would not be considered a "descendant of David" if Joseph

did not “adopt” him as his son. It is true that Mary was also a descendant of David, but the Jews always reckoned ancestry through the father – even if the child was not the “direct descendant” of that person.

Let us then end our study with one final question:

How does Joseph illustrate the saying: “To believe is also to do”?

[*Answer:* Faith and works go hand in hand. If you believe something is true you will live as if it is true. Joseph believed the angel's message. His life, then, was patterned after that belief. This serves as a good illustration for our lives as Christians: if we believe God's word is true – that God saved us from sin that we might live a life to his glory by avoiding sin – we will live according to that belief. If we do sin, we will then go to the cross– trusting in Jesus promise to forgive us – and again ask God to help us avoid sin and live to his glory.]