

Luke 1:5-25

NIV Harmony 32; Compassionate 18-21

Introduction

1. Have you ever had a secret, some good news, about which you were sworn to secrecy?
 - a. It's sometimes hard to keep a secret.
 - b. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, heard from God that he would soon have a son. That was good news to a father who had wanted a son for many years.
 - c. However, due to his unbelief about this good news, Zechariah was struck dumb until John's birth.
 - d. How frustrating it must have been to have such good news and not be able to speak it to others.
2. **Read Luke 1:5-25.**
3. Zechariah received good news from God about His plan of deliverance for His people.

A. Zechariah Serves as a Priest (5-10)

1. "In the time of Herod king of Judea . . ." (5a)
 - a. This was Herod the Great (73 BCE - CE 4), the founder of the Herodian Dynasty,
 - b. Herod was an Idumean and his father was an Edomite, which displeased the Jews whom he ruled.
 - c. Herod was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate in 40 BCE.
 - d. He was known for his colossal building projects including the expansion of the Second Temple.
 - e. He was a tyrannical and paranoid ruler who banished several family members and executed three of his own sons.
 - f. Herod also tried to kill the infant Jesus, whom he saw as a threat to his throne (cf., Mt 2:13-18).
 - g. Upon Herod's death the Romans divided his kingdom among three of his sons and his sister.
 - a. Herod Archelaus became Ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (4 BCE-CE 39).
 - b. Herod Philip II became Tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis (4 BCE-CE 34).
 - c. Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (4 BCE-CE 39).
 - 1) Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded (cf., Mt 14:1-12).
 - 2) He would also be part of the trial of Jesus (cf., Mt 23:6-12).
 - h. Herod the Great's prideful grandson, Herod Agrippa I, was struck down by God (cf., Acts 12:19b-25).
 - i. Herod's great grandson, Herod Agrippa II, was the last ruler of the Herodian Dynasty and heard the testimony of Paul before Felix and Festus at Caesarea (cf., Acts 25:13-26:32).
2. Zechariah and Elizabeth (5b-7)
 - a. Zechariah was a descendant of Aaron though the line of Abijah. (5) His name means "Yahweh remembers," which it is clearly true based on the coming fulfillment of God's promise to Zechariah of the blessing of a child to the previously barren couple.
 - b. Elizabeth, his wife, was also a descendant of Aaron. (5) Her name means "oath/promise of God." It was God's promised deliverance that God remembered and brought in part through the miraculous birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth.
 - c. They were both ". . . righteous (Gk., *dikaioi*) in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands (Gk., *entolais*) and decrees (*dikaiomasin*) blamelessly (Gk., *amemptoi*).
 - 1) Like Abraham (cf., Gn 15:6), they were considered righteous due to their faith in God not due to their faultless lives.
 - 2) The phrase "observing all the Lord's commands and decrees" indicates that they kept both the moral law (i.e., Ten Commandments) and the ceremonial law (e.g., sacrifices) as best as humanly possible.
 - 3) They, like Noah (cf., Gn 6:9) were not perfect but were considered "blameless" due to their faith in God and their desire for and actions in following God's commands and decrees.
 - d. They were "childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old." (7)
 - 1) The term "childless" (Gk., *steira*) was used also of Sarah (cf., Gn 11:30), Rebekah (cf., Gn 25:21), Rachel (cf., Gn 29:31), and of Samson's mother (cf., Jdg 13:2-3). Sarah was also "well advanced in years" like Elizabeth (cf., Gn 18:11).
 - 2) Being childless was commonly considered to be a sign of God's displeasure.

- 3) G. Campbell Morgan comments, “. . . by such lack they were cut off from all relationship to the hope for Messiah . . . hoping that from their loins would spring their long-looked for Messiah” (G. Campbell Morgan. *The Gospel According to Luke*, 17).
 - 4) Charles Erdman writes, “. . . godliness is no guarantee against sorrow or against the disappointment of human hopes, and these pious souls were saddened because their home was childless. This trial was peculiarly great among a people who regarded childlessness as a sign of divine displeasure and it was even more distressing to the hearts of the faithful who were yearning for the birth of the promised Messiah” (Charles Erdman, *Gospel of Luke*, 20).
3. Zechariah Serves at the Temple (8-10)
- a. Temple duty rotated among the twenty-four priestly family lines (cf., 1 Chronicles 24) with each family serving one week twice each year. All the families served during the busy holy days of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. It is estimated that the total priesthood consisted of 18,000 to 20,000 men at this time.
 - b. Zechariah was chosen “by lot” (Gk., *elache*).
 - 1) This would have been considered an appointment by God as lots were cast to determine the will of God. Remember the holy lots called the *urim* and *thummim* in Ex 28:30.
 - 2) It was also a once-in-a-lifetime experience since due to the large number of priests, one could expect to be chosen for this important duty only once.
 - c. Zechariah’s duty was to clean the altar of incense in the Holy Place and place fresh incense upon it. This altar lay in front of the curtain sealing off the Holy of Holies where God’s presence dwelt. (9) This service was done every morning and evening by a chosen priest.
 - d. The assembly of worshipers prayed outside the temple in the courtyard as Zechariah went in to pray and burn incense before the Lord. (10)
 - 1) Zechariah may have prayed personally for a son as he stood before the presence of God (v. 13).
 - 2) He along with the people most likely also prayed for the birth of Messiah in fulfillment of God’s promised deliverance of His people.

B. Zechariah Encounters an Angel of the Lord (11-22)

1. The “angel of the Lord (Gk., *aggelos kuriou*) appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.” (11)
 - a. The angel of the Lord is a messenger from God and is mentioned often in the Old Testament.
 - b. This angel is given a name, Gabriel (v. 19).
 - c. Gabriel will also bring an important message to Mary (cf., Lk 1:26) and perhaps to Joseph (cf., Mt 1:20). Matthew does not give Gabriel’s name in his account.
2. Zechariah was “startled” (Gk., *etarachthe idon*) and “gripped with fear” (Gk., *phobos*) when he saw the angel. (12)
3. The angel delivered a common command in such encounters, “Do not be afraid (Gk., *Me phobou*).” (13)
 - a. This was God’s word to those who had angelic visitations in the Old Testament.
 - b. It was also God’s word to Mary (cf., Lk 1:30) and Joseph (cf., Mt 1:20).
 - c. Warren Wiersbe writes, “‘Fear not’ is a repeated statement in the gospel of Luke (1:13, 30; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:7, 32)” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 19).
4. The angel comes with a message of salvation and deliverance for both Zechariah and Elizabeth as well as for all of God’s people. (13-17)
 - a. “Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son . . .” (13)
 - 1) The child’s name will be “John” (Gk., *Ioannen*) which means “Yahweh is gracious.” The name of the one coming after John will be *Yeshua* (Gk., *Iesous* – “Jesus”), which means “God is salvation.” The names of both John and Jesus ring out the coming grace and salvation of God for His people.
 - 2) John will be a “joy and delight” not only to his parents but also “many will rejoice because of his birth” (14).
 - a) They will rejoice that a childless couple now finally has been blessed with a son.
 - b) Even more they will rejoice at the message of coming deliverance that this child will bring as the forerunner of Messiah.

- 3) John will be dedicated to the Lord as a Nazarite which requires sobriety and other lifestyle changes (e.g., not cutting hair). (15)
 - a) He will drink “. . . no wine or fermented drink . . .” (cf., Nm 6:2-5; Jdg 13:4-5; 1 Sam 1:11).
 - b) He will also have a unique, holy life set apart for God’s purposes in ministry as Messiah’s forerunner.
 - c) “. . . he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.”
 - d) Because of his faithful response to his calling, “he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”
 - b. “He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.” (16)
 - c. He will work “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” (17)
 - 1) Craig Blomberg writes, “Like Elijah (2 Kgs 2:9-10) John was endowed with the Spirit. There is a close tie between ‘spirit’ and ‘power’ in Luke-Acts, and when ‘power’ is mentioned, one can usually assume that it is the Spirit who is empowering . . .” (Craig Blomberg, *Luke NIV*, 77).
 - 2) He will be part of God’s answer to His promised deliverance.
 - 3) He will “. . . turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous” (v. 17 also cf., Mal 4:6).
 - 4) G Campbell Morgan writes, “It is significant that the angel ended with the last words of hope from the Hebrew prophet. Four hundred years no voice, and then the final words that had come from an authentic prophet, were spoken in the Temple to a listening priest. That prophecy, that final word was now about to be fulfilled, and the mission of the forerunner was declared” (G. Campbell Morgan. *The Gospel According to Luke*, 16).
 - 5) God had been silent for almost 400 years. That time of silence would be broken by John’s voice proclaiming the coming of salvation for God’s people.
 - d. John will not be the deliverer but His forerunner “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (17)
5. Zechariah had questions.
- a. As often happens in these angelic encounters (cf., Gideon Jd 6:17ff), the recipient of such a powerful word of deliverance can’t believe his ears. “How can I be sure of this?” (18a)
 - 1) Zechariah had trust issues.
 - 2) The angel gave his name—Gabriel. To give one’s name reveals who one is. Remember Jacob’s desire to know the name of the angel with whom he wrestled at Peniel (cf., Gen 32:22-30).
 - 3) The angel gave Zechariah assurance that he can trust the message.
 - 4) What is impossible with men is possible with God (cf., Lk 18:27).
 - b. Zechariah questioned the angel: “I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” (18b)
 - 1) Zechariah has faith issues.
 - 2) Zechariah, don’t you remember Abraham and Sarah and the miraculous birth of Isaac to them?
 - 3) The angel reminded Zechariah that he “stand(s) in the presence of God” (19a). Gabriel has come from the other side of the current from the very presence of holy God.
 - 4) The message is not Gabriel’s but the Lord’s. “I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news (Gk., *euaggelisasthai* – “gospel”).” (19)
 - 5) Blomberg writes, “. . . God’s visit to Zechariah marks for Luke the breaking in of the messianic age, i.e., the beginning of the things that God has fulfilled among his people” (Blomberg, 73).
 - 6) The news may seem to be too good to be true, but Zechariah can trust it and must believe it because the Lord is the source of Gabriel’s message.
 - c. Gabriel gave Zechariah a sign that his word was true and could be trusted, believed. (20)
 - 1) It was not probably a sign that Zechariah would have chosen. Be careful what you ask for!
 - 2) Since Zechariah did not trust the messenger and believe the message, he would not be able to share the news vocally until the word was fulfilled.
 - 3) Erdman concludes, “This sign was at once both a rebuke and a blessing. It rebuked the unbelief of the aged priest, yet it strengthened his faith. . . . Zacharias would not accept the word of the Lord: he would not praise him for his goodness and his grace. Therefore, his tongue was to be silent and he was to be unable to speak until at last his lips were opened in glad thanksgiving. Unbelief is never joyous; infidelity has no songs” (Erdman, *Gospel of Luke*, 22).
 - 4) Zechariah communicated the good news using writing or sign language (v. 22), but how frustrating it must have been not to shout it out along with praise to God!

6. Meanwhile back in the courtyard, the people were waiting on Zechariah's return (21-22).
 - a. Zechariah had been gone a long time, longer than normal, in the temple. The people awaited his return and benediction (cf., Nm 6:24-26).
 - 1) They thought perhaps Zechariah had sinned and been struck dead by the Lord.
 - 2) Or maybe he had received a message from the Lord. If so, they were eager to hear it. Would their prayers for deliverance soon be answered?
 - b. Finally, Zechariah returned.
 - 1) They knew something had happened. He had had a "vision" (Gk., *optasian*) in the temple." (22)
 - 2) However, they were frustrated that he could not speak and share with them what he had seen.
 - 3) Zechariah ". . . kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak" (22).

C. Elizabeth Becomes Pregnant (23-25)

1. When his time of service at the temple was completed, Zechariah returned home to Elizabeth. (23)
2. "After this his wife Elizabeth become pregnant." (24a)
 - a. The indication is that John was conceived normally unlike the supernatural conception of Jesus.
 - b. Elizabeth knew that her pregnancy was special and an answer to prayer that came from God: "The Lord has done this for me" (25a).
3. Elizabeth ". . . for five months remained in seclusion." (24b)
 - a. Although Zechariah and Elizabeth knew why she had become pregnant in her old age, what would other people say?
 - b. Erdman surmises, "She would not have others, but seeing her, think that she was under divine displeasure at the very time when she secretly knew that she was a special recipient of divine grace" (Erdman, 22).
 - c. Wiesbe writes, "Apparently, the amazement and curiosity of the people forced her to hide herself even as she praised the Lord for His mercy. Not only was she to have a son, but the birth of her son was also evidence that the Messiah was coming! These were exciting days indeed!" (Wiersbe, 20-21).
 - d. Blomberg notes, "We know of no custom that would have required Elizabeth to do this. During this period her pregnancy apparently was unknown. . . . Luke, however, did not explain why Elizabeth remained in seclusion, but this explains Mary's ignorance of Elizabeth's pregnancy in 1:36" (Blomberg, 78).
 - e. Elizabeth's unexpected and unknown pregnancy will be a sign given to Mary (cf., Lk 1:36).

D. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection

1. Have you ever had a prayer that seemed to go unanswered which you continued to lift to the Lord?
 - a. Don't doubt that God hears you. He will answer.
 - b. Not everything we ask for is God's best for us. He will answer when the time is right.
 - c. When the time and will of God align, the answer will come.
2. As with the bareness of Elizabeth and Zechariah, godliness is no guarantee against sorrow or against the disappointment of our human hopes.
3. Have you ever doubted God's word or asked Him for a sign of confirmation?
 - a. It is good to verify the source, but once God speaks we must embrace and obey His word.
 - b. Morgan writes, "One can imagine how, during the dark days of those four hundred years, devout souls would sometimes be tempted to say: God must have forgotten, God must have broken down, God must have failed! Some Christian people so speak today, when things look dark. God has not forgotten, God has not broken down, God has not failed" (Morgan, 16).
4. Have you ever had good news to share but been sworn to secrecy?
 - a. Jesus has freed you to speak openly with others about the good news of the salvation that He offers
 - b. Don't be mute like Zechariah but share the good news of Jesus boldly in word and deed.