

# THE PREPARATION OF ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

*Series: To Make Ready a People Prepared for the Lord*

by Doug Goins

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While all of Scripture is 'inspired of God and profitable,' most of us have favorite sections and passages. If pressed to name my favorite gospel, the one I read most often devotionally, it would be the gospel of Luke. Matthew is special. It has the Sermon on the Mount, those beautiful statements of spiritual reality in the Beatitudes. Mark, the briefest of the gospels, is the gospel of action. It is filled with miracle narratives and exhortations to see life with spiritual, not just human eyes. The gospel of John is the grandest of the gospels, the most cosmic in its scope. It speaks of eternal life, eternal realities. In it we have those gracious, wonderful words of hope where Jesus talks about his Father's house that he is going to prepare for us, a house of 'many mansions.'

Luke is my favorite because it is the gospel of stories. There is the beautiful Christmas story that we will consider together these next six weeks the angelic appearances to Zechariah and to Mary, angel choirs that appear to lowly shepherds and sing 'Glory to God in the highest.' There is the unforgettable story that Jesus told of the Good Samaritan; our Lord's three parables of salvation, the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son; his sobering narrative of Lazarus and the rich man; the resurrection story of Jesus' walk with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke is a master storyteller. It is hard to imagine the life and teachings of Jesus without these incredibly vivid pictures. Yet not one of those stories appears in any gospel but Luke's.

Something else unique about Luke, that is attractive to me as a student of God's word, is that it is the only gospel whose author wrote a sequel. That is what the book of Acts is a companion volume to the gospel of Luke. The gospel tells the story of Christianity from the very beginning--the life of Christ through his death, resurrection and ascension; and the Acts of the Apostles continues that story the missionary advances made in the church in the years following the ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is really the story of the life of Christ continuing to be lived out through those in the early church, his body.

Luke's own preface to Acts is really an historian's introduction. Look at the opening paragraph of the book, verses 1-4:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

The essayist Northrup James has written, 'Every biographer and historian attempts to write the best account yet. Drawing on all that has gone before him, yet adding that unique quality which he alone can give, he seeks to say the definitive word, the one that will martial all the others into gleaming perspective. Even though additional writers may come after him, assaying the same task, his story, he hopes, will provide the unavoidable focus for theirs.'

Luke expresses that concern as he begins his account of the life of Jesus and the early church. He draws on previously written narratives of the life of Christ. He personally interviewed people who were eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. Beyond that he interacted with people who ministered with the Lord Jesus, whom he identifies as the 'Word', the logos of God. Luke's methodology as an historian reflects the uniqueness of his person. He is an educated man, a medical doctor. As such he brings to this account the precision of a scientist but the sensitivity of a physician. Luke is a cultured Greek, with an obvious artistic sensitivity that comes out

through this gospel. He is a friend and co-worker of Paul's, committed to the same truth, the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. His writing reflects a Spirit-controlled commitment to historical accuracy and the beauty of artistic order.

Let us look at the introduction to this first story, the preparation of Zechariah and Elizabeth, in verses 5 through 25 of the first chapter of Luke's gospel. In verses 5 through 7, Luke introduces the time-frame and the central characters.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Herod, the king of Judea, ruled in Israel from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. He was the first Jewish king to sit on the throne since the fall of the Southern Kingdom some 580 years before. There had been 580 years of Jewish humiliation and servitude under Babylonians, Persians, the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great, the Ptolemy Empire of Egypt, and the Syrian domination of the Seleucids. Now, at this time, Israel was controlled by the might of Rome. There had only been 105 years in that entire period when Israel had known any independence, after the Maccabean revolt against the Syrians.

Herod was not a real king of Israel. He was merely a puppet, a vassal put there by the authority of Rome. He was a man of degeneracy, not a man of God. He should have been a spiritual leader, a model to the people, yet he was everything but that. The land was rife with immorality. Herod had introduced Roman temples into the land and had built idols to Roman gods. He had introduced the Roman games into the life of Israel. Gentile money flooded the country, causing great economic instability and imbalance. He had encouraged a Babylonian immigration into Israel which upset the economy. Even the priesthood was corrupt; there was much buying and selling of priestly offices. These were desperate times in Israel, times of darkness, weariness, injustice, disease, economic desperation.

In terms of how they affected people, those times were not that much different from our own. Look at the prayer sheet in our Peninsula Bible Church Family News. The things that bedevil people have not changed that much since the time of Herod. The first prayer request is from a sister who is struggling with cancer. The second, from a family that is unemployed. There is a request from a woman who is concerned about her sister's relationship to men and problem with drugs; yet another for a woman involved in a wrongful relationship. There are prayer requests for someone following an attempted suicide; from a man struggling with an addiction to drugs, to drinking and gambling; from a single mother who needs work. The last request reads, 'Pray for my father, having his second surgery in as many months, that he will recover rapidly and not need me because I am struggling taking care of my two grandchildren, battling the legal system to protect baby Michael. May the Lord return him safely to us. Heal my daughter who is a drug addict and help me retain my sanity.' These are desperate times for many people, as they were back then.

But in the midst of that darkness and corruption, Luke introduces us to a simple, faithful couple, an elderly priest and his wife, who lived lives pleasing to God. They were both of the tribe of Aaron, and had been born and raised in homes of priestly families who served the temple in Jerusalem. They had been given very special names by their parents. The boy was named Zechariah ('Yahweh remembers'), while the girl was named Elizabeth ('the oath of God'). By naming them in this way their families appealed to God's character, to his word, that he would be true to his promises. The children carried those names and that identity throughout their lives.

Their marriage was seen as a great blessing to their families. It was considered a double honor from the Lord to marry a virgin from a priestly family. But the rejoicing quickly faded as it became evident that Elizabeth was barren; she could not have children. That was her 'reproach among men' (verse 25), her humiliation and shame, the subject of gossip. They had lived with this throughout their married life, yet before the Lord there was something attractive about them both. They are described as spiritually beautiful, righteous before God.

They were in right relationship to Yahweh, to one another and to the community. The evidence for that was their faithful ministry and service to the worship life of Israel. There was consistency between their inward and outward life. God had seen in this faithful son and daughter of Israel people who loved him.

The next paragraph, verses 8 through 12, introduces us to a God who answers prayer, a God who meets needs.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

As a male member of the tribe of Aaron, Zechariah was entitled to offer sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. There were so many descendants of Aaron that they were divided into groups, and those groups served in the temple only two weeks in the year. Within each group that served, lots were cast to decide which priest would be permitted to officiate and give an offering. No priest was allowed to do this more than once in a lifetime, and even then many never had the opportunity to participate the way that Zechariah was privileged on this morning.

After a lifetime of waiting, Zechariah finally enters at the 'hour of incense' and stands at the altar just before the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. There were two prayer offerings, one that began the day of worship in the temple right at dawn, and the same offering was repeated at night, to close the day. Aromatic spices were put on the coals of the altar, a powerful, beautiful symbol of the prayers of Israel rising to God. As the priest, alone in the temple, placed the incense on the altar, he prayed for the deliverance of Israel, and offered prayers of intercession on behalf of the people of Israel. When he prayed, 'a great multitude,' as it says here, would have gathered outside the temple, prostrate on their faces in the outer court, praying with the priest who represented them in the Holy Place.

Christians have the same privilege. Scripture says that the prayers of the saints are beautiful perfume in the nostrils of God. Whenever we pray, either alone or with others, we are presenting an offering to the Lord. Today we sang the great hymn, 'Jesus Shall Reign Where'er The Sun.' The name of Jesus, we sang, 'like sweet perfume shall rise with every morning sacrifice.' We are privileged to continue that ministry as God's people, and every week our prayer and need sheet provide us opportunity to offer up intercession for those in our body. Let us be faithful in our sacrifice of prayer.

In the midst of Zechariah's prayer an angel of God appears and stands at one end of the altar, right in front of the priest.

After 400 years of silence there had been no supernatural manifestations from God, no prophetic word, since Malachi some 400 years before to a people praying and hoping, God sends an emissary to speak on his behalf.

There are three things to note about the angelic appearance at this particular time and place. First, it is amazing that God even chose the temple at all. He chose it in spite of the fact that much of its ministry had become trivialized, much of its priesthood politicized. Herod himself was in a 30-year process of building a new temple. Even then it was considered a monstrosity. One first-century observer says it looked like 'gilt boxes laid end-to-end.' Further, it was not a spiritual place for much of Israel. It was regarded as sort of an historical landmark, a national shrine. Evelyn Underhill calls the temple worship of the period 'a frozen doxology.' It was a mere whisper of the life and vitality it once represented. Yet God chooses the temple, historically the center of corporate worship, to announce the continuation of his eternal plan of salvation.

The second significant thing to note is the time of day that God chose. It was the time when the most believing people would have been gathered praying for their nation and for their identity as a people.

Finally, God's choice of Zechariah is amazing. The angel appeared before a simple, even rustic, priest. Zechariah and Elizabeth did not live in Jerusalem, in the priestly enclave. They lived in a little town out in the

hill country of Judea (vs. 39). Fifty weeks a year they lived and worked there, but two weeks a year he would come in and minister in the temple. The angel did not appear to the high priest, to one of the priestly elite, the religious upper crust, but to Zechariah.

I can understand Zechariah's fear. 'He was troubled,' we read in verse 12, 'and fear fell upon him (or overcame him).' He was probably scared to death. That is not hard to understand. He had waited a lifetime for this opportunity to minister in the temple. It was for him a time of great emotion.

He is ill prayer before the Lord, finally fulfilling this act that he had hoped for all his life, and while he is intently focused on that, an angel appears right in front of him. All the Bible tells us about angels is that they are young men in white robes. Zechariah knew the angel did not belong there at least under normal circumstances.

I can identify somewhat with Zechariah's fear. I have been a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church for more than seven years and this is the first time the elders have asked me to preach a series of messages. Just this experience alone is intimidating enough, but if on top of that an angelic being presented himself in front of me I'd probably fall down dead!

But look at God's personal words of reassurance to Zechariah. Here are the first words spoken by the angel, verse 13:

But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...'

The angel addresses him by name, to calm his fears. 'Your prayers have been answered.' The prayers of Zechariah for the salvation of Israel and for the deliverance of his people, yes, they would be answered, for God was about to inaugurate a saving purpose. But the prayer that perhaps had long since been forgotten, the aching prayer that God would bless him with 2 son God was going to answer that prayer as well. 'Elizabeth is going to have a baby. Your prayers have been heard . '

It is hard to tell whether these next verses are hymnic. They are, at least, poetic, as the angel conveys God's message in a beautiful artistic form, verses 13-17:

'...and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth; for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared.'

The angel names the baby that is coming, he describes his character, and identifies the purpose he will serve. The name John means 'God is gracious.' So a father named 'Yahweh remembers' and a mother named 'The Oath of God' are to be gifted with a baby boy whose name is 'God is gracious.' The angel says too that this birth will have a very immediate personal impact on Zechariah and Elizabeth: 'You will have joy and gladness,' he promises. God cares about people. He is concerned about how this news will affect them. That theme of rejoicing and gladness is repeated over and over again throughout Luke's gospel. Luke knows that Jesus Christ brings joy to people, and that joy is going to start with Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The angel describes the character of this miracle baby, saying that God has already determined his spiritual effectiveness, his 'greatness.' From conception he will be filled up, controlled by God's Holy Spirit, like the judge Samson and the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament. His life will be one of single-minded purpose. He

will be a man spiritually disciplined for God's use, influenced perhaps by his father's priestly ministry in his growing-up years, and by the ascetic focus of the Nazarites.

The angel talks about the ministry of John, a ministry of preparation for the coming of the Messiah. These words in verses 16 and 17 echo the words of the prophet Isaiah. Luke himself uses the exact same words to describe the ministry of John, in chapter 3, verses 2-6:

...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

'The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways shall be made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

This baby boy would be a forerunner, preaching repentance, purifying the hearts of people, creating a desire and expectancy for the gospel of Jesus Christ which would follow.

These words of the angel also echo the last written prophetic word of some 400 years earlier when the prophet Malachi spoke of this one who was to come. Malachi 4:4-6:

'Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.'

He would come in the same spirit, the same power and with the same effectiveness as the greatest of Old Testament prophets, Elijah himself. John was coming to restore the purity of Old Testament faith and turn a generation of rebellious children back to the faith of their fathers, Abraham, Moses, Isaac and Jacob, to prepare their hearts for the life and preaching of Jesus Christ.

This miraculous announcement really underscores an important principle of God's economy: no matter how long it takes, God will accomplish his stated purposes. There may be periods of seeming inactivity like the 400 years of silence in the history of Israel but those periods really suggest that God is sovereign over his salvation history. We are not sovereign. Even in our own lives, our own personal salvation history, God is in charge. From his perspective everything is on schedule.

It is hard for us to understand this. It must have been hard for the people of Israel to understand it. Godly men and women who lived during that 400-year period would cry out, 'Has God forgotten us? Has God's plan of salvation broken down? Has God failed? Is he not one who keeps his word?' But when the angel appeared, the answer to those questions was an emphatic 'No.' God had not forgotten. His word was trustworthy. The thing predicted is now coming. God is true to his word. As a matter of fact, in his final word the angel says, 'These things will be fulfilled in their proper time.' (vs. 20) God will accomplish everything I have said to you, Zechariah, in the proper time sequence. We often sing that praise chorus in worship, 'In His Time': 'He makes all things beautiful in His time.' It is much easier for me to sing the chorus than to really live it out, however. I struggle with impatience. It is easier to talk about trusting God and waiting than it is to actually do it.

The issue of impatience became a little clearer to me last week. Some months ago I promised my children that one day soon we would all take a train ride together. As to when, in my mind there was a certain openness about the date. But for the last couple of months, now, my four- and six-year-olds have been impugning my integrity, asking, 'Daddy, did you really mean that? Are you ever going to take us on the train?' They were genuinely concerned whether I would keep my word. Last Monday (before I preached this message, thank goodness!) all six of us rode the train for three hours. As delighted as my children were, my six-year old was especially relieved and happy that her dad could be trusted, that I did what I said I was going to do. My children taught me how the people of Israel must have felt, and reminded me of my own struggles in trusting God's timing to accomplish the things he says he will accomplish.

Look at Zechariah's response to this truth. Verses through 22:

And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.' And the angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.' And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he made signs to them and remained dumb.

What began as fear had by now grown into full-blown disbelief. Zechariah's question, 'How shall I know this?' is really inferring, 'Give me a sign; proof that I can trust your word.' He says, 'My wife and I are too old. This doesn't make sense . '

Look at Gabriel's pointed response in verse 19. First, he identifies himself. 'My name is Gabriel.' (His name means 'the power of God.') 'I represent God's power.' Secondly, he declares, 'I stand in the presence of God always.' This is the same angel Gabriel whom the Old Testament prophet Daniel had seen with the host of heaven some 600 years before. Thirdly, Gabriel reminds Zechariah that he is personally sent by God. Finally he says, 'What I told you is good news. You should be deliriously happy, praising God, not questioning my word. You want a sign? All right, you've got a sign. All these things will come to pass in spite of your fearful disbelief, but you will not speak for nine months, until the baby is born, There is your sign.' God's purposes and commitments will not ultimately be thwarted by fleshly human frailty.

Notice also that in the beginning Gabriel is very gentle and understanding with Zechariah's fear. But in the face of a choice to not believe God's word he becomes very stern. In this sign, this nine months of dumbness, there is a strong discipline. God disciplines those whom he loves.

Zechariah has spent much more time than normal in the Holy Place. The people are waiting outside for the benediction. They know there is something out of the ordinary going on. When he finally does appear, his inability to speak perhaps something about his physical appearance suggest that the supernatural is at work. The news spread quickly through the crowd, through the city of Jerusalem, through the countryside. 'Did you hear what happened to the old priest Zechariah? When he came out of the Holy Place he couldn't talk. He probably saw a vision or something.'

The story ends quietly, almost matter-of-factly. When you consider the intensity of this vision and the angelic message, Luke concludes this story very softly. Verses 23 through 25:

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself, saying, 'Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.'

Following his two weeks of service, Zechariah leaves the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem, goes home to the privacy and obscurity of his village and tries to communicate to his wife all that happened to him, all that he

saw and heard and how he felt, all of his struggles. We learn later that he did this by writing. He must have had writer's cramp by the time he finished!

But the angel Gabriel's strong word of discipline must have gotten through to him because he was obedient to what God had said. He went home and made love to his wife. That was an act of faith, an act of obedience. Faith finally exercised itself in obedient activity.

Elizabeth, a senior citizen, became pregnant. Her response, in the last verse, is very different from Zechariah's first response of disbelief. Hers is a beautiful prayer of gratitude, a softly reflective prayer. She believes God: 'The Lord has done this to me.' Here is a beautiful picture of believing faith. She uses three personal pronouns, 'done to me...when he looked on me...take away my reproach among men.' She understood that God cares deeply about the 'reproach' of his children. God sees us each one individually.

In Elizabeth's pregnancy two things are happening. God is accomplishing his eternal plan, universal in its scope, through Zechariah and Elizabeth and their son who was to come, but on a very personal, intimate level God is mercifully healing this couple's pain of barrenness.

In response to God's gracious act, Elizabeth chooses five months of isolation and privacy. She needed time to pray, to commune with the Lord, to study the Old Testament prophecies about what was beginning to unfold. She needed the time to fellowship with her husband, to minister to him in his struggle, time to draw deeply from God's well of resource .

It was a period of preparation for the ministry she would have with her young cousin Mary, a preparation for what, at her age, would probably be a difficult birth; and finally preparation to parent the baby John, this one who would be forerunner of Messiah.

There is much here for us to ponder as we prepare, through this season of advent, to celebrate the birth of Messiah. As Zechariah was confronted with God's truth spoken by Gabriel, we are now confronted by the truth of God's word written by Dr. Luke. It is truth that calms our fear, extends to us the grace of God, challenges our impatience, confronts our unbelief, and heals our barrenness.

Like Zechariah Elizabeth, we have the wonderful privilege of responding to God's word in believing, active faith. May this six-week season before Christmas be one of preparation for us as a church family and may it 'make us ready, a people prepared for the Lord.'

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