

January 2 Lesson

Today we read about Zechariah and Elizabeth and the conception of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5–25). Luke begins his account by saying, “In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah...” (1:5a). So let’s start by looking at Herod; who was this guy? Well, he’s known as Herod I because he was the first in a long line of Herods who ruled over Israel; but you know him as none other than Herod the Great, the infamous king who slaughtered all the male children of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus.

Now you might think that’s all there was to Herod, just a crazy killer, but actually, Herod was an interesting and complex man. He was racially Arab (Edomite), religiously Jewish, culturally Greek and politically Roman. In his early days, he was described as good-looking and powerfully built. His father had been friends with both Pompey, the great Roman general, and Julius Caesar; and Herod himself was friends with Mark Antony. Julius Caesar made Herod’s father the procurator of Judea, and his father made Herod governor of Galilee. After his father was assassinated, Herod became the king of Judea.

Now, eventually, Herod’s friendship with Antony caused him to become involved in the struggle for control of the Roman Empire, and he sided with Antony and Cleopatra against Octavian. After defeating Antony at the Battle of Actium, Octavian (who became Caesar Augustus) traveled to Rhodes to plan his next move. Herod quickly made his way there to meet Octavian, and he was granted an audience.

Herod came in without his crown, and he boldly confessed to all the support he had given Octavian’s enemy. He also admitted that he had remained loyal to Antony even in his defeat. Herod finished by saying, “What I ask of you is to consider not whose friend, but what a good friend, I was.” Octavian decided that Herod was a man he could trust and told him to put his crown back on his head. Herod returned to Israel with his grip on the throne more secure than ever.

Now, Herod wasn’t just a politician; he was also a great builder—he built massive fortresses and beautiful cities (we’re talking about Masada, the Herodium, and Caesarea Maritima). But his greatest achievement was the remodeling and expansion of the temple and the temple mount. The massive retaining wall that supported the weight of the ground and all the structures can still be seen to this day, and the exposed portion on the west is now known as the Wailing Wall, where Jews still come to mourn the destruction of the temple. One foundation stone discovered in the western retaining wall measures 45 feet long by 11 feet high by 15 feet wide. It weighs nearly 600 tons.

So, Herod was brilliant, yes, but he was also brutal, and over time, he gradually fell apart. He was insecure, jealous and vengeful, and his wives took advantage of this as they schemed to advance their own interests. Their intrigues led Herod to murder the brother of his favorite wife Mariamne, as well as the husband of his sister Salome. He eventually became suspicious of Mariamne, accused her of adultery and had her executed. After that, he would sometimes wander through the palace calling her name and sending his servants to find her. His sons were often seen as political rivals to the throne and toward the end of his life, he had two of his sons strangled. So this is the man who was king of Judea at the time.

<Now, if you’re curious about Herod and want to know more, you should get the book by Stewart Perowne called *The Life and Times of Herod the Great*, it’s a great read>

OK, we’ve looked at Herod, and now it’s time to talk about Zechariah. Who was Zechariah? Well, Zechariah was a descendant of Aaron, so he was a Levite and a priest. His name meant “God remembers.” He was married to Elizabeth (which means “God is my oath”); she was also a descendant of Aaron, and Luke tells us in verse six that “they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (Luke 1:6).

This is a very important verse, because it shows us that it was possible to be in a right relationship with God under the old covenant. Not only that—it also shows us that it was possible to keep the commands of the Law without relying on them for justification. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived by faith, and they manifested the combination of outward compliance and inward obedience that God wanted from His people.

Now, Zechariah and Elizabeth were old, and they had no children because Elizabeth was barren. This was often seen as a disgrace in those times, and indeed, later on, Elizabeth thanked God for taking away her “reproach,” so we know that the barrenness was a source of grief and shame for her. But the couple’s righteousness shows that the lack of children was not the result of judgment or sin. Rather, God had something special in mind—and I find that personally encouraging. If you’re ever tempted to think badly of God, remember Elizabeth and know that when the end of your story is told, you’ll look back with wonder to see that all God’s works were good and all His ways were just!

So, Zechariah was a priest, and Luke says that he was “of the division of Abijah,” so what does that mean? Well, back in the time of King David, there were more priests than the work required, so the priests were organized into 24 groups or divisions. Each division would serve on a rotating basis during two separate weeks each year, and all the divisions would serve during the festivals when there were huge numbers of people.

The 8th division was that of Abijah, a descendant of Aaron’s son Ithamar. Now, as you know, Judah was exiled to Babylon, and when they came back from captivity, only 4 of the 24 priestly divisions returned to Judah (Ezra 2:36–39; 10:18–22). However, for the sake of tradition, the Jews wanted 24 divisions, so the leaders divided the remaining 4 divisions into 24 and restored the former names. So Zachariah, while probably not in the line of Abijah—since Abijah was not one of the divisions that returned after the exile—nevertheless served in the division that bore the name of Abijah.

Now, by the time of Zechariah, there were thousands and thousands of priests, and so the honor of going into the temple and burning incense was chosen by lot. This means that this was probably the first time in his life that Zechariah was given this special privilege, and I can imagine how excited he must have been! So outside, all the people are praying, and Zechariah goes inside to burn the incense, and the angel Gabriel appeared to him.

Now, who was Gabriel? Well, the Bible doesn’t tell us much about Gabriel, other than the fact that he stands in the presence of God (I should point out that his status as an arch-angel is only speculation). The first time we hear about Gabriel is in Daniel 8 when he explained to Daniel the meaning of the vision of the ram (Media/Persia) and the goat (Greece). He appeared again in Daniel 9 in answer to Daniel’s prayer of confession for Judah, and gave Daniel the prophecy of the 70 weeks. And then we don’t hear about Gabriel until right now, in the temple with Zechariah, some 542 years later! And with Gabriel, God once again speaks to his people, after a silence of hundreds of years.

Now, Gabriel tells Zechariah that his prayer had been heard, and so the question is, what prayer? It seems as though Gabriel is referring to a prayer of the past, one in which Zechariah asked God for a child. Zechariah had likely concluded that God’s answer was No, but now he discovered that the answer was actually Wait. Elizabeth was to bear a son, and his name would be John, which in Hebrew means “Yahweh is gracious.”

Then, Gabriel told Zechariah what a special son John would be: 1) he would bring joy to his parents and many others, 2) he would be great before the Lord, 3) he would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God (speaking of repentance), and 4) he would go before the Lord “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 righteous, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” Now most of this is straightforward, but the

last statement about Elijah and turning the father's hearts to the children is not quite as clear. So what did Gabriel mean by this?

Well, Gabriel is referring to the prophecy given in Malachi 4:5-6, which says, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome 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 strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Mal 4:5-6). Now you might think, well, this means that John is the Elijah that Malachi prophesied about, but actually, when John was asked, "Are you Elijah?" he said, "I am not." (John 1:20-21). Yet Jesus told the crowds, "If you are willing to accept it, John is Elijah who is to come" (Matt 11:14) and he told his disciples, "Elijah has already come," and he was talking about John the Baptist (Matt 17:9-13).

So, this is confusing—is John the Elijah prophesied by Malachi or isn't he? Well, the answer is Yes and No. No—John was not Elijah the Tishbite himself, returned from heaven, but Yes—John was Elijah in the sense that he was a prophet like Elijah, a "spiritual Elijah," for the same Spirit and power that rested on Elijah the Tishbite, would empower John to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Now, some think that John the Baptist fully fulfilled Malachi's prophecy, while others believe that John was a forerunner of the Elijah who is yet to come. Either way, as Jesus said, "Elijah has already come."

Now, what about turning the hearts of fathers to the children? Well, when Adam sinned against God, it was a son turning away from his father, for Adam was a son of God. Ever since then, fathers and sons have been estranged from one another, only truly coming together as they both turn back to God. And so this was the great work that John would accomplish—he would bring fathers and sons back together as they both repented of their sins and turned to God, their heavenly Father. In this way, John would prepare a people for the coming of the Lord.

Gabriel also told Zechariah: 1) John must not drink wine or strong drink, and 2) John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. The reference to abstaining from wine recalls the Nazirite vow of Numbers 6, and the wording here in Luke is very close to the wording about Samuel (1 Sam 1:11) and Samson (Judges 13:4-7). Because of this, many think that John was a life-long Nazirite, just like Samson and Samuel. The reference to the filling of Spirit is connected with the prohibition against wine. John was to be only under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit; he was never to be under the influence of alcohol (Eph 5:18). The statement that the Spirit would fill John from the womb didn't mean that John was saved from birth; rather, it meant that John was set apart for special service to God, and the Spirit's power was on him from birth in order that he could accomplish his important mission.

Now, when Gabriel was finished, Zechariah said, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." That sounds like a reasonable question right? Later on, when Gabriel appeared to Mary, she asked something similar: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Yet Mary was not rebuked, while Zechariah was struck with muteness. What's going on here? Well, Zechariah was looking for proof—he wasn't going to believe *until* he received a sign. Mary was looking for an explanation—she believed she would get pregnant and was curious about *how* it would happen. Zechariah's question came from unbelief, while Mary's came from trust. And that makes all the difference in the world. Ironically, Zechariah was given a sign—his own silence became the sign that what Gabriel said would come to pass.

And sure enough it did. Elizabeth conceived, and she hid herself for five months (there are all kind of views on why she did this, nobody knows). And she said, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." What a beautiful vindication by God of a blameless life!