

January 4 Lesson

Today we read about the birth of John the Baptist. So, yesterday, we read how Gabriel told Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, and you remember that Mary left Nazareth and went to see her relative Elizabeth who was six months pregnant at the time. Now, we're not told how Mary and Elizabeth were related. The KJV of Luke 1:36 says, "And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age," but the Greek word simply means "kinsman" or "relative," and so we can't be sure how they were related.

Now we're told that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a city of Judah in the hill country. According to tradition, that city was the modern day Ein Kerem, a village to the southwest of Jerusalem. Ein Kerem is surrounded by beautiful natural groves and the breathtaking landscape provided by the Jerusalem Hills. The houses are made of local Jerusalem limestone, and they sit in the shadow of Christian churches whose bells ring out across the town.

The Church of the Visitation, which commemorates Mary's visit to Elizabeth, is located on a southern hill above Ein Kerem. The mosaic on the front shows Mary being watched over by angels as she travels south to see her relative. The verse under the illustration is in Latin, from Luke 1:39—"And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah."

Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home. And I remember being surprised by this—why would Mary stay up to the moment of Elizabeth's delivery and then leave? I think the answer lies in Luke's tendency as a writer to clear the stage of all but the primary actors before narrating a new scene. I believe that Mary was there for John's birth; it's just that with the focus now on Elizabeth and Zechariah and John, Mary fades into the background.

So, the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. And just as Gabriel had said, her neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her. Picture this scene: people are packed into the house, there is laughter and excited chatter, everyone wants to hold the baby...and what about Zechariah? For him, there is only silence. Not only was he unable to speak, he was also deaf! We know this because when they asked Zechariah what he wanted to call his son, they had to make signs to him in order for him to understand.

Let's think about that for a minute. Let's think about the cost of unbelief for Zechariah. During Elizabeth's pregnancy, when his wife wanted to share what she was thinking and feeling, he couldn't hear. When Mary came, and Elizabeth cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" he couldn't hear. When Mary burst into her song of praise and said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," he couldn't hear. When Elizabeth gave birth, and the baby gave its first cry, he couldn't hear. When the people rejoiced, and their laughter filled the house, he couldn't hear. Unbelief robbed Zechariah of some of the most precious sounds of his life. And that's the way it is for us today, friends. If we don't trust God, if don't believe him and rest in his promise, we can miss out on some of the most important moments of our lives.

So, the eighth day came, and in obedience to Leviticus 12:3, which commanded the circumcision of newborn sons, the people prepared for this important ceremony. And they were going to call the child Zacharias after his father. Now in those days, sons were not always named after their fathers, although they sometimes were, but they were at least named after some relative. But Elizabeth kept insisting that the child's name was John, even though none of their relatives was called by that name. She was firm about it, almost fierce: "No; he shall be called John!" And I want to point out that what Elizabeth did *was an act of faith!* How so? Because anytime we respond in obedience to the word of God, it is an act of faith,

for obedience is the perfection of faith. It was also an act of love, for those who love God, do what he says.

Zechariah responded the same way, and when he affirmed that the child's name was John, in obedience to God's command, immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. Don't you love that? After almost a year of total silence, the first words out of Zechariah's mouth were word of praise to God. Aren't you glad that there's forgiveness for unbelief? Aren't you glad that there's restoration after sin? Aren't you glad that there's joy after pain? I'm personally encouraged by the praise of Zechariah, for it teaches me that there is always hope and healing for those who have the courage to repent and rededicate themselves to God.

So Zechariah praises God, and what he says is called "the Benedictus," which is from the Latin of the first word: "Blessed." And what does Zechariah say? Does he thank God for being able to speak again? Does he thank God that he can hear again? Is he praising God for giving him a son in his old age? No, the first thing Zechariah does after his long silence is to praise God for raising up a Redeemer and a Savior for Israel. And that of course is Jesus. (I can't help but think that he was looking at Mary as he said this.)

Now what Zechariah said can be divided into two parts: (1) the first is all about Jesus (vv. 68–75), and the (2) second is about his newborn son John (vv. 76–79). And Zechariah says that God has visited and redeemed his people. As you recall, after Jesus' crucifixion, two of his disciples were dejectedly leaving Jerusalem and walking to Emmaus, and they meet a stranger on the road (who is actually Jesus) and they tell him that they were hoping that Jesus "was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). And the truth is, Jesus did redeem Israel, but it was not in the way they were expecting, it was a spiritual redemption!

Zechariah goes on to say that the Redeemer would be of the house of David, which, of course, invokes the idea of Messiah, for Isaiah and Jeremiah, the holy prophets from of old, both prophesied that God would raise up a descendant of David to be a Savior-king (Jer 23:5–6; Isa 11:1–5). Jeremiah said, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" Isaiah said, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

Zechariah then praises God that they would be saved from "our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us." So who is this talking about? Is he talking about the Romans? That's what it might seem like at first, but in v. 77 Zechariah connects "salvation" to the forgiveness of sins. That means this is talking about more than the defeat of physical enemies. Israel's redemption is going to be first and foremost, a spiritual redemption. Year later, when Jesus commissioned Paul to preach the gospel, he told Paul: "I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18).

Zechariah then goes on to make a connection between Jesus the Redeemer and the promise that God swore to Abraham. I want you to see this—I want you to understand the connection between Christ and the promise to Abraham, because Paul tells us that the gospel was preached to Abraham. Now, we don't normally think of the gospel when we think of Abraham, but we should!

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, the new converts who were saved on his first missionary journey, he told them, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." Remember, Paul is writing to Gentiles, people who had no idea who Abraham was before Paul showed up, and Paul wanted them to understand that Jesus was the promised offspring of Abraham, in

whom all the nations would be blessed. So the gospel message was being preached more than 2000 years before the birth of Christ!

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Peter told his fellow Israelites: "You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness." So we can see that the blessing that was promised to the nations was the blessing of being saved from their sins!

Zechariah concludes this section about Jesus with a reminder of why God saves us from our sins—so that we may live lives of holiness and righteousness! Don't miss that! Jesus didn't come to save us and leave us the way we were; he came to transform us, to take us from death to life, and to enable us to live godly lives in the midst of the world's wickedness.

Zechariah then speaks about his newborn son John, and he says that John would be called the prophet of the Most High. He would go before the Lord to prepare his ways—this is talking about a spiritual preparation, a call of repentance which would prepare the people's hearts to receive Jesus, the Son of God.

John's ministry would reflect the mercy and goodness of God, for God longs to give light to all who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. The goal of John's ministry was that all who heard and believed, would enter the path of peace and find salvation for their souls.

In closing, I want you to think about where Zechariah's words came from. These beautiful and prophetic statements didn't just pop into his head out of nowhere. Luke tells us that Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. That means what he said was straight from the heart and mind of God. Zechariah, the man who didn't believe the angel Gabriel, the man who doubted the promise of God, was now speaking the praises of the King. And so I like to think that the first heart John prepared for the coming of Christ was that of his own father.