

Elizabeth . . . and Zechariah

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in an eight-week series

July 23, 2017

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Luke 1:13–17 (CEB)

¹³The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. ¹⁶He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Luke 1:39–45 (CEB)

³⁹Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. ⁴⁰She entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²With a loud voice she blurted out, “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

One woman. One son . . . who would proclaim the arrival of Israel’s king.

This is a series on “supporting actors.” But when it comes to Elizabeth, I’m not sure whom she was supporting. Zechariah, her husband? I suppose, in that she had to put with a mute and probably grumpy spouse after the visit from Gabriel. How about her relative, Mary? Certainly, Elizabeth took her in after Mary left Nazareth to have her baby. But, I suppose, more than anyone, Elizabeth was supporting God. For reasons only God knows, Elizabeth was chosen to be the mother of John the Baptizer, the one who would announce to the world the arrival of its rightful king, his relative, Jesus, Mary’s boy. So here is Elizabeth’s story.

A memorable day

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was built around animal sacrifice; in the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. Somewhere around 6-4 BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah’s department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God’s sanctuary and offer up incense.¹ This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life. Elizabeth and her family had to wait patiently outside.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, “Don’t be afraid.” Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s prayers were about to be answered.

¹ In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the “holy of holies” in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

Hannah's Story

More than 1000 years before Elizabeth's visit with Mary, another Jewish woman struggled with barrenness, for "the LORD had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:6). Hannah was the first and favorite wife of Elkanah but, like Elizabeth, she carried the shame of childlessness. In order to have heirs, Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah, who had many children by Elkanah and made Hannah's life miserable.

After many years of this, while visiting the priests at Shiloh, Hannah prayed fervently for a child, promising God that she would dedicate the child to the Lord's service. As the NRSV puts it, "the LORD remembered her," and Hannah gave birth to a son, Samuel. While he was still young, Hannah took him to Shiloh and dedicated him to God. Samuel grew to be a judge of the Israelites and a great prophet of God. Samuel anointed both Saul, the first king of Israel, and David, the second.

When Hannah came to Shiloh with her young son, she prayed a song beginning, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God" (1 Samuel 2:1). There are numerous parallels between Mary's song, the Magnificat, and Hannah's son. Both songs focus on God's turning the world upside down – he "raises up the poor from the dust . . . he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes" (1 Samuel 2:8).

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives had been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman's barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, Elizabeth was too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. As the old man did his duty, an angel had appeared right in front of him, promising a child. And not just any child. Many people would rejoice at their son's birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the Lord. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming Lord.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel's message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son's birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elizabeth, of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her

engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

What joy we see in the first meeting of these two pregnant women, one old, the other young (Luke 1:39-45). Far from a dry recounting of the encounter, Luke gives us a poignant and emotional portrait of the moments when the formidable mothers of John and Jesus meet. Darrell Bock help us see more of Elizabeth in this passage:

Elizabeth is exemplary in her response. She is the "amazed saint." Her attitude is summarized in the question "Why am I so favored?" Here is humble amazement at being able to participate directly in God's plan and see him at work (2 Sam 6:9; 24:21). All who have a role in God's plan should share this wonder.

Elizabeth recognizes the unique blessedness of Mary (*blessed are you among women*) because of the child she bears (*blessed is the child you will bear*). The remark is rhetorical and should not be read as if Mary is the most blessed of all women. It means she is "very pleased" (compare Judges 5:24; Song 1:8). The

attitude of Elizabeth is representative of what Luke desires in any believer. What a joy to share in the events associated with Jesus. What a joy to share life with him.

Elizabeth also reveals a second exemplary attribute, one that also is found in Mary. While reporting the leaping of John in her womb, she expresses a beatitude for Mary's faith: "*Blessed is she who has believed.*" Here is the essence of response to God, to trust his word to be true and live in light of that belief. To be blessed is to be happy because God has touched one's life. Such divine benefit rains down on those who trust him and his promises. Blessing emerges from God's ability to bring his promises to completion, but to share the benefits, we must be confident that God does what he says. The first sign of such faith in Mary was her willingness to let God use her (v. 38). The second was her immediate (*hurried*) visit to Elizabeth, who herself served as a sign that God keeps his word and can give life (vv. 36, 39).

Theophilus and readers like him should not doubt, but rejoice and be assured that God keeps his promises. Trust and joy are two vital aspects of a successful walk with God. Elizabeth's joy is shared by Mary, who will utter a hymn of praise to God for his gracious work on her behalf. Mary's psalm also comes from the heart of a grateful believer.²

The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah's incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews' wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John's birth precedes the announcement of his cousin's birth, so Luke tells of us John's birth before he tells us the story of Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant's circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, "What then is this child going to be?" They know, as Luke writes, that "indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John "will be called the prophet of the Most High" and "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

So there you have it . . . all that we know of Elizabeth, all drawn from the first chapter of Luke's gospel. But we know that there was much more to this woman. And we use our informed imaginations to fill in the gaps. Did she live a long time? Long enough to see John grow? Or did she die knowing only the promise of what was to come?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Though Zechariah had stepped into the temple, he was not prepared to be confronted by the presence of God. He was certainly not prepared for his prayers to be answered, for surely he and his wife would never have children. Consider this. Are we prepared for God's presence in our lives? Do we really expect that our prayers will be answered? Can we see the presence of God in our midst? Two thousand years ago God burst in on the scene in a dramatic and unexpected way? What are some things we might do this Advent to help us be more prepared for God's bursting into our own lives and to trust that he does so?

² Bock, D. L. (1994). *Luke* (Lk 1:29). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

2. Can you even imagine the sheer joy that must have been running through Elizabeth and Mary? Luke's Gospel is filled with such stories of joy. What are some joyful stories of your own life? What have been the most joy-filled times in your life? I remember that when my first son was born I felt like I was electrified . . . though, in truth, I don't know that I can really describe my feelings. Perhaps it was one of those out-of-the-body experiences. I simply remember being joyful in every part of my being. Perhaps that is what it was like for Elizabeth and Mary. Discuss what these joyful experiences have in common. How might they point us toward God, especially God as Savior and Redeemer?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: The story of Elizabeth . . . and Zechariah . . . and John

Monday, Luke 1:5-25 The angel Gabriel comes to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah.

Tuesday, Luke 1: 39-56 Mary comes to visit Elizabeth.

Wednesday, Luke 1:57-66 Elizabeth gives birth to John.

Thursday, Luke 1:67-80 Zechariah's prophecy re John.

Friday, Luke 3:1-14 John heads to the Jordan River to call Israel to repentance.

Saturday, Luke 7:18-35 John sends messengers to Jesus.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Truth About Angels*

Coming in October 2018: A cruise to Israel with Scott & Patti

For more information go to www.scottengle.org